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# THE NEW YORKER

DEC. 26, 2005
& JAN. 2, 2006

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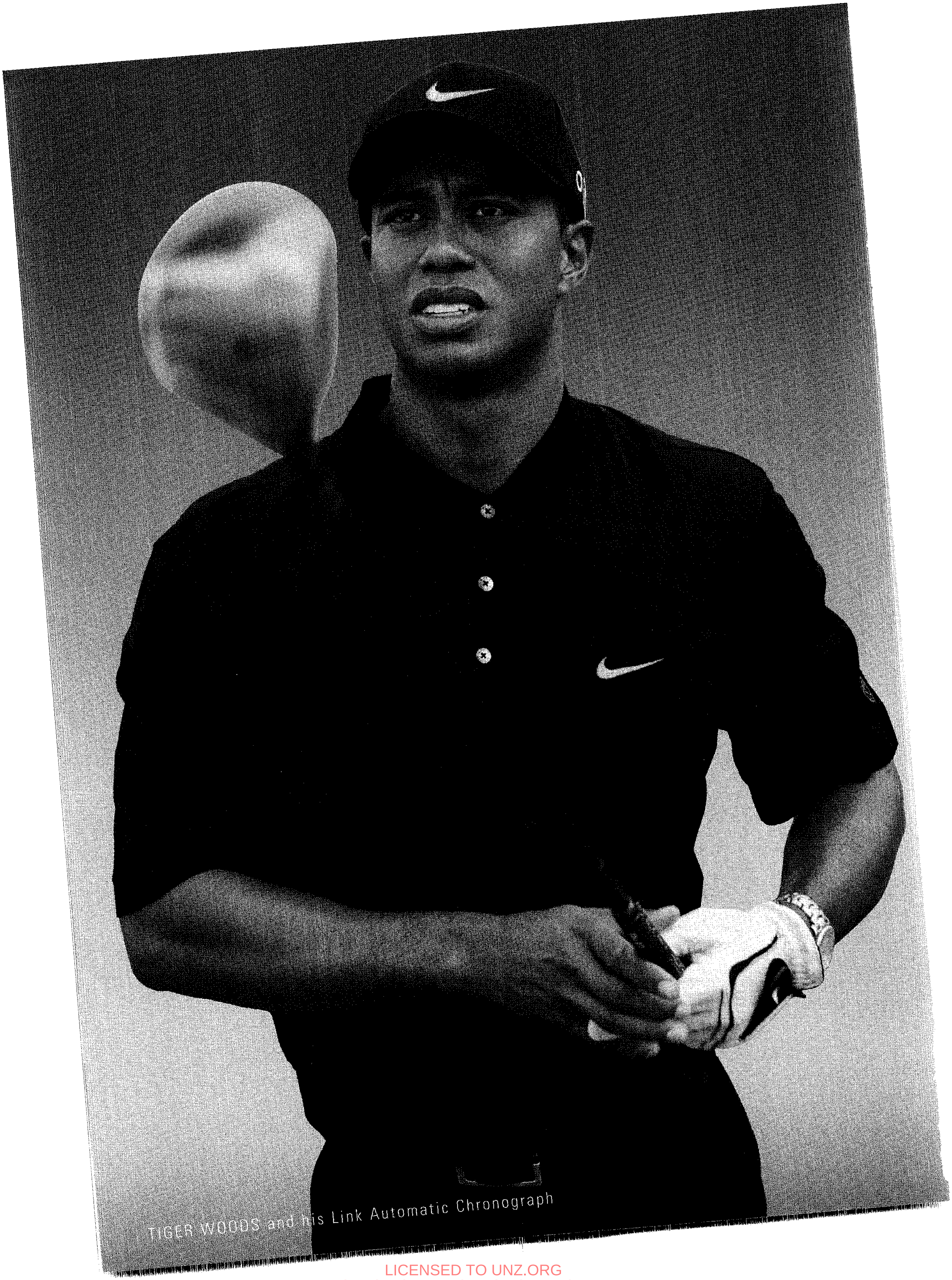
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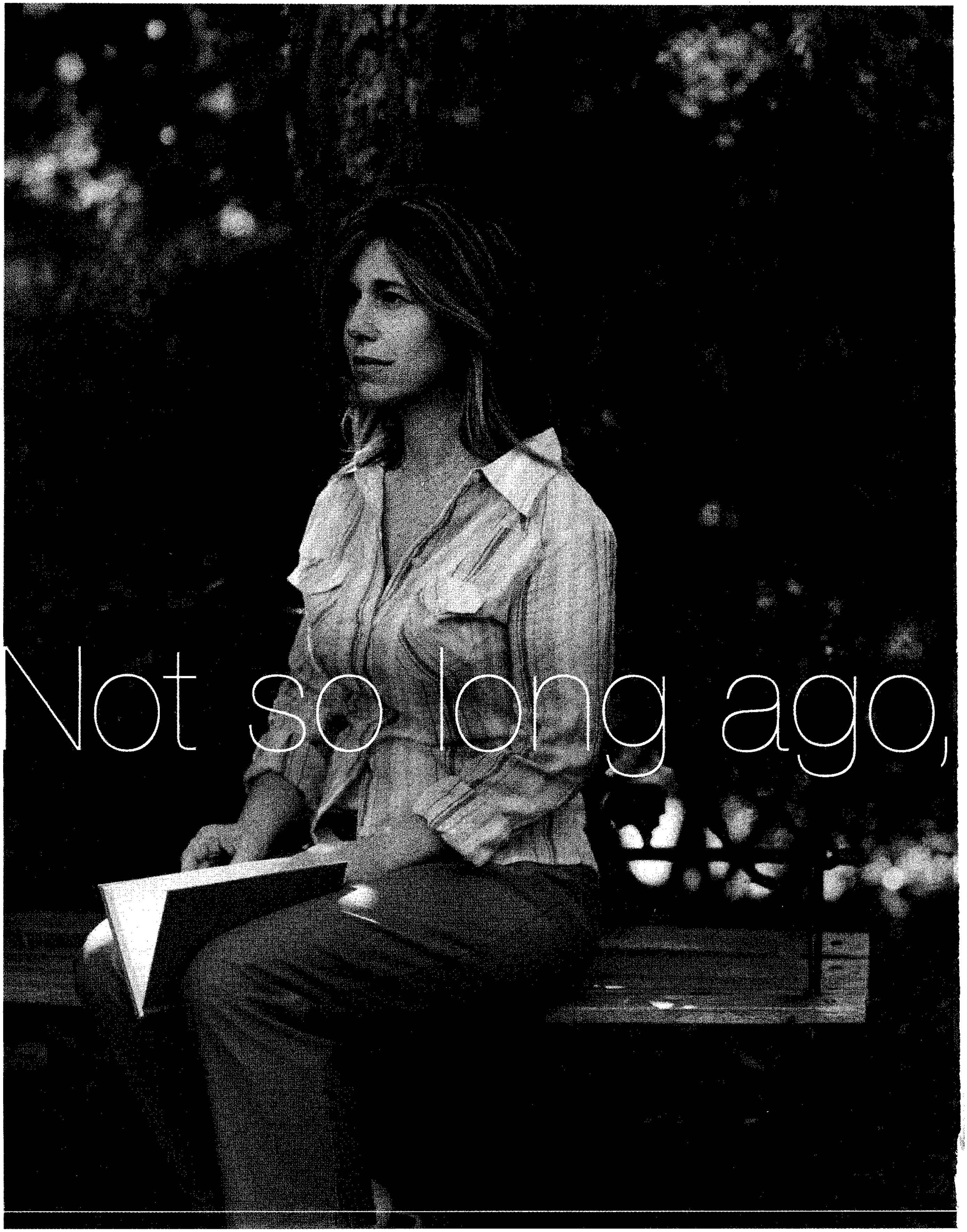
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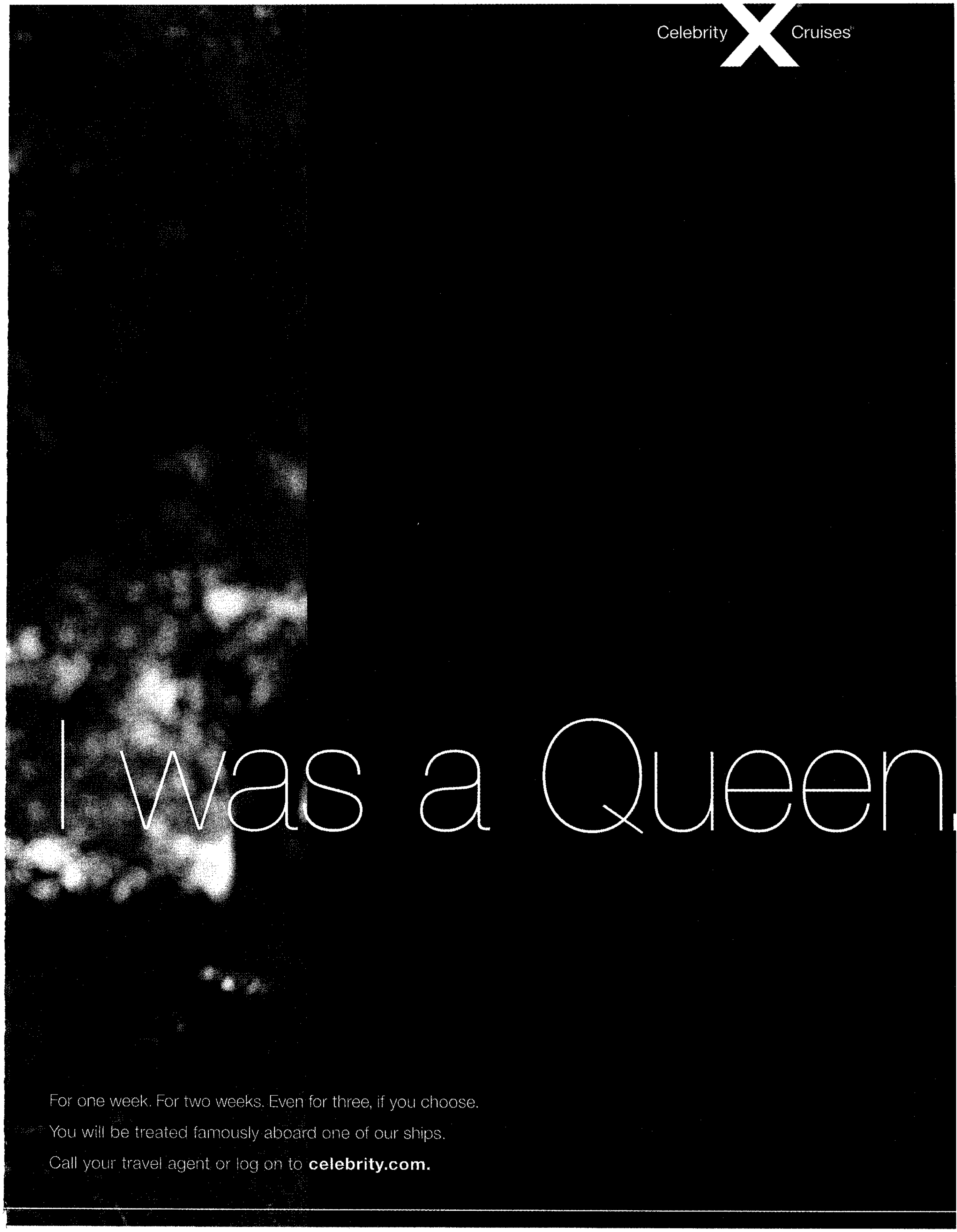

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# THE NEW YORKER
# INTERNATIONAL FICTION

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# CONTRIBUTORS

Laura Miller ("Far from Narnia," p. 52) is the editor of "The Salon.com Reader's Guide to Contemporary Authors."

Vladimir Nabokov ("The Word," p. 76) contributed to *The New Yorker* from 1942 to 1976. This story was published in Russia in 1923 and appears here in English for the first time.

Roberto Bolaño ("Last Evenings on Earth," p. 80), a Chilean novelist and poet, died in 2003. Two of his novels have been published in English, and a collection of short stories, "Last Evenings on Earth," comes out in the spring.

Yoko Ogawa ("Pregnancy Diary," p. 98), a Japanese writer, will publish her first book in English, "The Gift of Numbers," next summer.

Tahar Ben Jelloun ("Beauty Is a Fate Better Than Death," p. 108) is a Moroccan-born author living in France. His novel "The Last Friend" will be published in February.

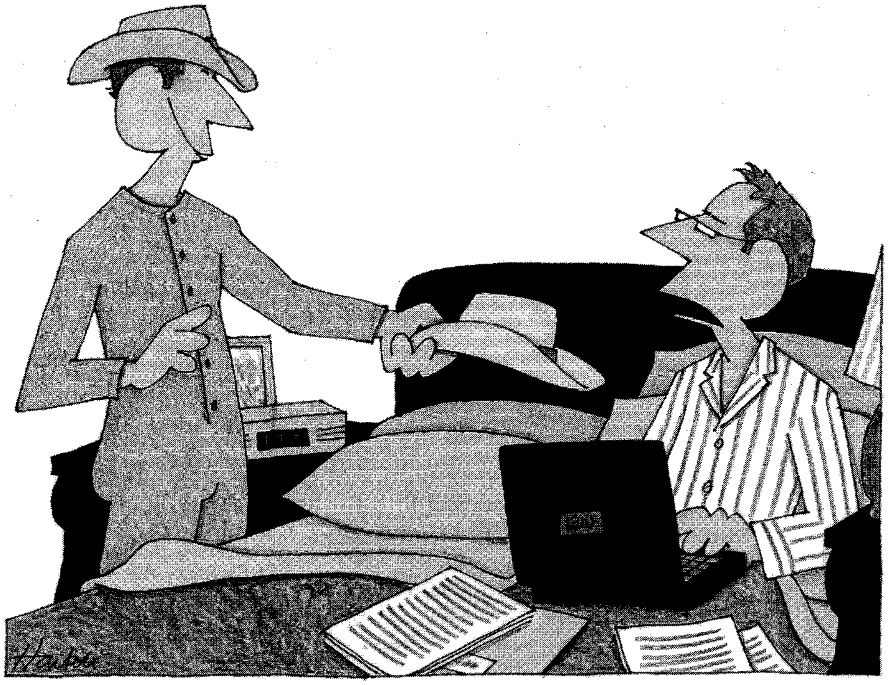
Tatyana Tolstaya ("Yorick," p. 96) lives in Moscow. Her most recent novel is "The Slynx."

Wislawa Szymborska (Poem, p. 104) received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1996. "Monologue of a Dog," her latest collection, was published last month.

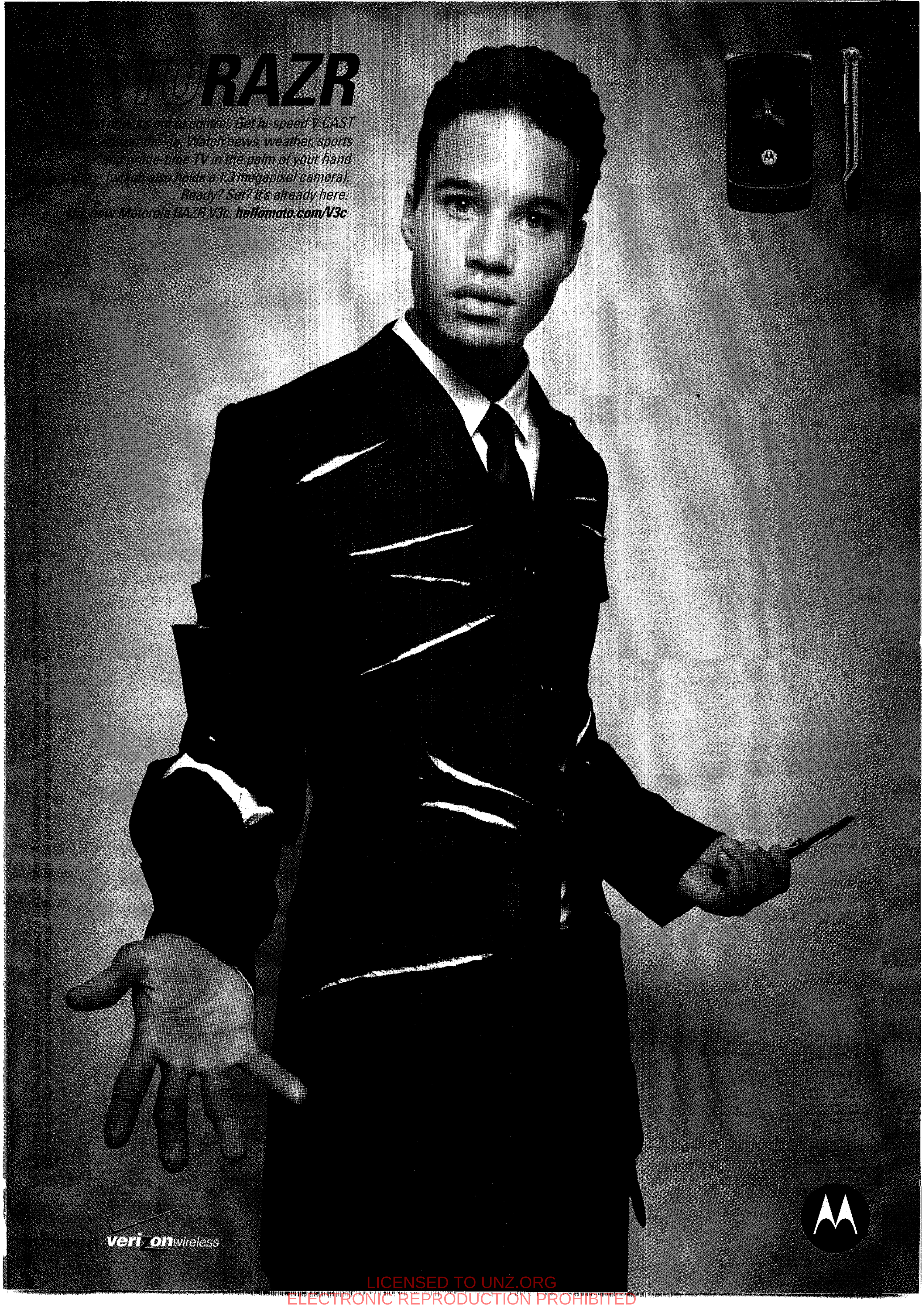
Ismail Kadare ("The Albanian Writers' Union as Mirrored by a Woman," p. 112), an Albanian poet and writer, was the recipient of the first Man Booker International Prize, in June. He is the author of, most recently, the novel "The Successor."

Jeffrey Frank (A Critic at Large, p. 128) is an editor at the magazine and the co-translator of "The Stories of Hans Christian Andersen." His novel "Bad Publicity" is out in paperback.

Edward Sorel (Illustration, p. 129) will publish "Literary Lives," a biography of ten writers told in comic-book form, in March. ♦



*"And what if I don't want to be Jack or Ennis?"*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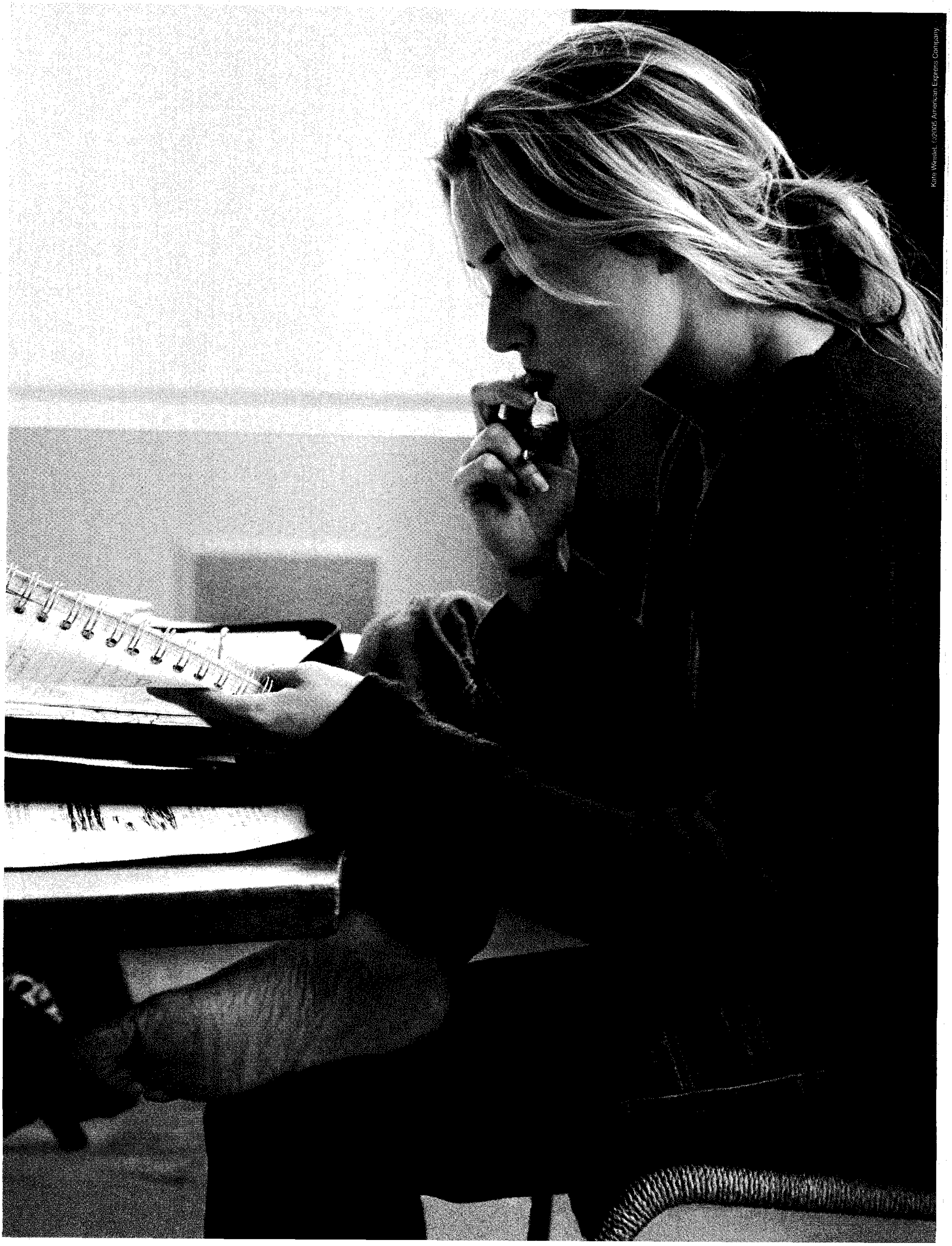

Kate Winslet. ©2005 American Express Company

My name Kate Winslet

childhood ambition To be an actress

fondest memory Camping as a child in Cornwall. U.K

soundtrack Rufus Wainwright "Poses"

retreat Any beach. Anywhere!

wildest dream To swim with Dolphins

proudest moment Giving birth to my children

biggest challenge My job.

alarm clock My son.

perfect day Sunday lunch with all the family in England

first job A Kids' cereal commercial

indulgence Chocolate

last purchase Latte and a muffin

favorite movie Waiting for Guffman

inspiration My parents

My life Is all about my husband and my beautiful kids.

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Kate Winslet

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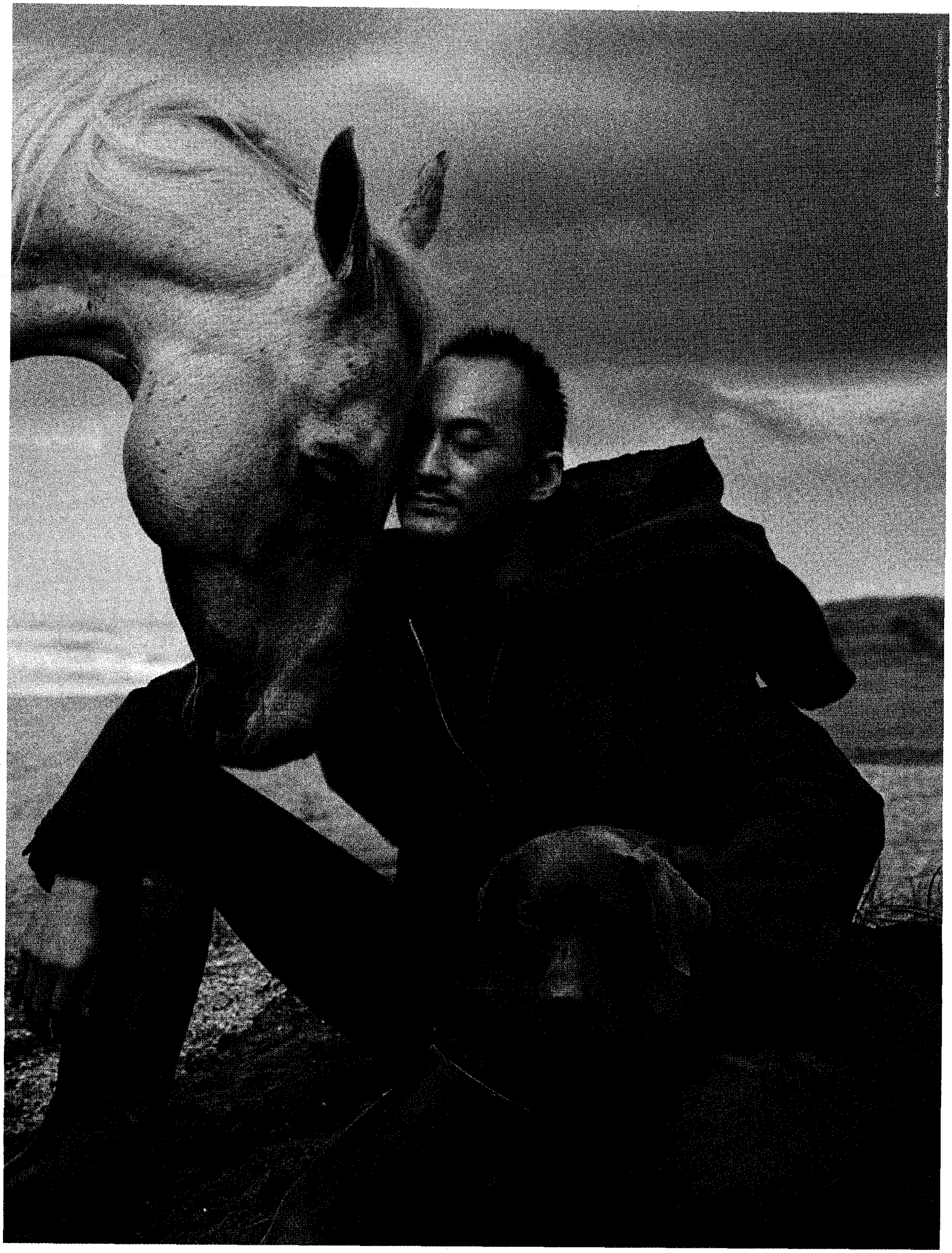
Ken Watanabe ©2005 American Express Company

My name Ken Watanabe
childhood ambition Trumpet player
fondest memory I have to many good memories to remember just one
soundtrack Warm & Cool jazz
retreat My home
wildest dream I would have had an answer to this question 10 years ago, but now is to find happiness in my everyday life
proudest moment When I gain trust from someone
biggest challenge Life
alarm clock My child's voice
perfect day searching for something I cannot reach
first job dog walker, and cleaning the stairs of my home
indulgence reading adventure novels
last purchase Ski wear and ski hat
favorite movie Too many to just chose one
inspiration I am inspired by so many things every day
My life is about taking my own path
My card is American Express

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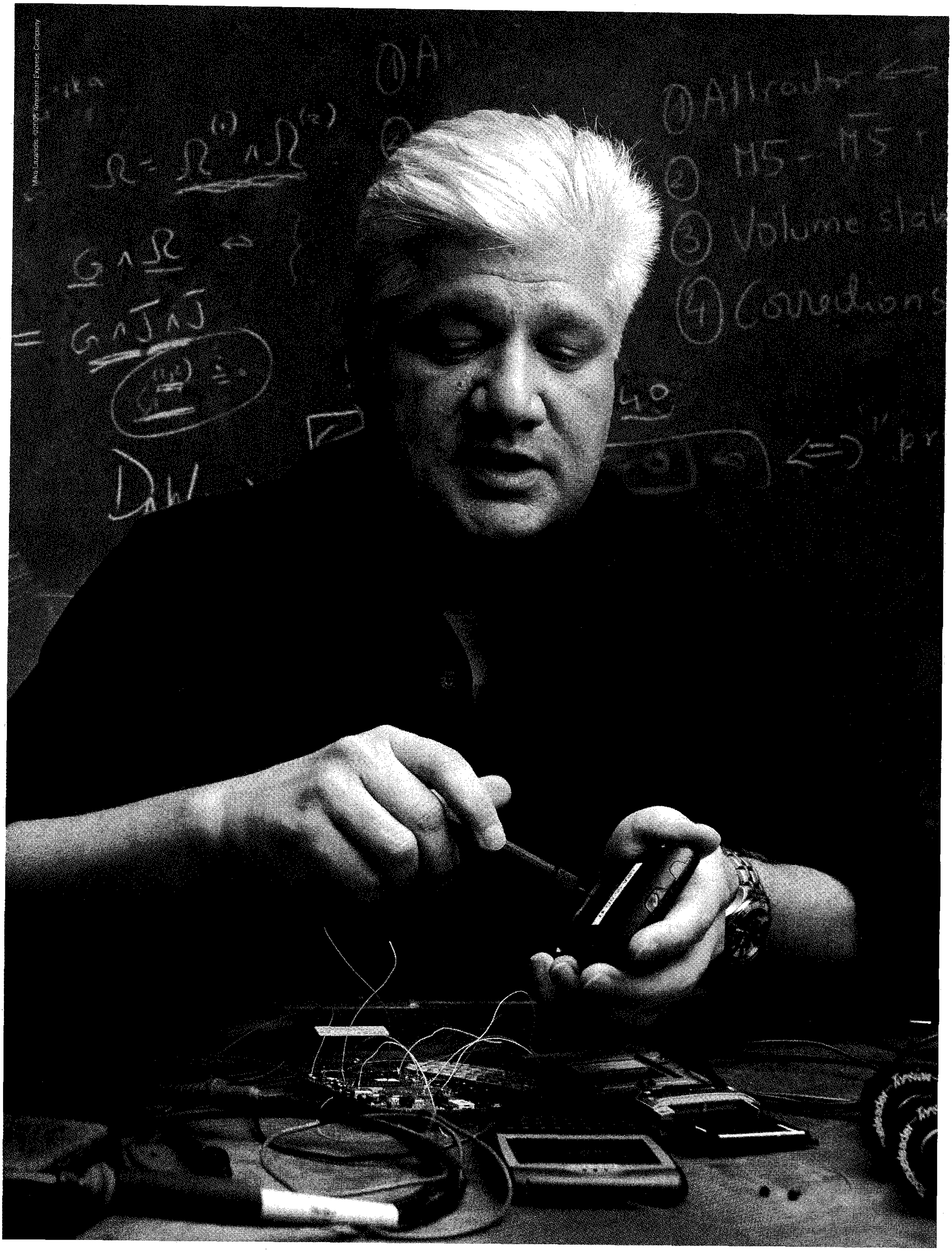
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Mike Lazaridis; ©2006 American Express Company

My name is Mike Lazaridis

childhood ambition was to change the world

fondest memory is the image of my children's smiling faces.

soundtrack is laughter.

retreat is reading.

wildest dream is to unlock the secrets of the universe.

proudest moment the opening day gala at Perimeter Institute for Theoretical Physics.

biggest challenge is spending more time with my family.

alarm clock is my BlackBerry.

perfect day is spent at the cottage with my family.

first job during University was designing microcode

indulgence is watching movies with my lovely wife.

last purchase was 4 iPod Nanos, one for each member of the family.

favorite movie is Primer.

inspiration is the power of imagination.

My life is about making ideas happen

My card is American Express

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Mike Lazaridis

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My name ……………………………………

childhood ambition ……………………………………

fondest memory ……………………………………

soundtrack ……………………………………

retreat ……………………………………

wildest dream ……………………………………

proudest moment ……………………………………

biggest challenge ……………………………………

alarm clock ……………………………………

perfect day ……………………………………

first job ……………………………………

indulgence ……………………………………

last purchase ……………………………………

favorite movie ……………………………………

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# THE MAIL

## MEDICAL MALPRACTICE

Atul Gawande impressively chronicles how our current system of justice—slow, expensive, and unreliable—fails both doctors and patients ("The Malpractice Mess," November 14th). The solution may lie in America's long tradition of special courts, which began in 1789 with separate admiralty courts. There are now bankruptcy courts, tax courts, workers'-compensation tribunals, and, as Gawande notes, vaccine-liability courts. These courts were all established to provide reliable justice in areas of particular complexity. Special health courts, in which judges are dedicated to resolving health-care disputes, could set precedents and provide guidance on proper standards of care. Currently, several leading hospitals, including New York-Presbyterian and Johns Hopkins, have expressed interest in being pilot projects for such courts, and Congress is planning hearings early next year.

*Philip K. Howard*
*Chair, Common Good*
*New York City*

One significant cause of patient injury which Gawande does not touch upon is the failure to protect the public from incompetent physicians. In fact, Massachusetts recently put in place an admirable program, under which the state's Board of Registration in Medicine holds a clinical review of any doctor who has been compelled to make three or more malpractice payments to patients. This helps identify the minority of doctors whose repeat offenses make up a significant part of filed claims.

*John R. Price*
*Dean Emeritus, School of Law*
*University of Washington*
*Seattle, Wash.*

Gawande's extensive piece on the runaway costs of medical-malpractice insurance fails to mention the key player—the insurance industry. In studying malpractice-insurance-providers' data, filed with state insurance offices, the former Missouri insurance commissioner Jay Angoff found that although premiums since 2000 have increased by a hundred and twenty per cent, claims in the same period have remained flat. Insurance companies argue that premiums are determined by predicting future claims, but the study also showed that the companies have continued to raise premiums even though their actual claims payments and projected future claims payments have been falling. In 2004, malpractice insurers' total premiums were three times as high as their total payouts. I believe that the medical and legal communities must work together to find real ways to cut the costs of medical-malpractice insurance.

*Ken Suggs*
*President, Association of Trial Lawyers of America*
*Washington, D.C.*

Although Gawande's article successfully captures the fundamental flaws in our current malpractice system, it is also important to note how this has affected medical education. Today, the brightest medical students often avoid "high risk" specialties such as surgery, and compete fiercely for spots in specialties that have limited contact with patients. The new generation of doctors see the legal responsibilities associated with directly caring for patients as emotionally taxing and undesirable. The consequence may be more mistakes, more lawsuits, and further draining of the pool of competent candidates.

*Sean Khozin, M.D.*
*New York City*

## LEWIS AND RELIGION

Adam Gopnik's recent article on C. S. Lewis includes some misleading statements ("Prisoner of Narnia," November 21st). First, Lewis did not "insist" (or even suggest) that the Anglican creed is "the single cosmic truth." On the contrary, Lewis attempted to be inclusive of all Christian traditions, focussing on "mere Christianity," not one denomination. And although it may be true that "a former Archbishop of Canterbury" (I assume that Gopnik means Robert Runcie) didn't much like Lewis's writings, Runcie's successor, George Carey, used to quote freely from Lewis in sermons; the present Archbishop, Rowan Williams, who has twice addressed the Oxford Lewis Society, confesses to having an "enthusiasm" for his works.

*The Reverend Dr. Michael Ward*
*Chaplain, Peterhouse, Cambridge University*
*Cambridge, England*

Gopnik makes a strong point with regard to Lewis's mythic narrative: the more explicitly Lewis loads his images with the particulars of Christian doctrine, the less effective the images become. Yet Gopnik's own portrayal of Lewis's Christianity adheres just as strongly to doctrine—that of a refusal to acknowledge the reality that can be perceived through imagination. Gopnik claims that "fairy stories are not rich because they are true," and that to hope they convey a message beyond themselves "is the futile hope of the mystic." Although Gopnik recognizes that atheist and believer meet in the need for a world lit by imagination, his own imagination fails in his refusal to allow that this human hope might indicate a deeper truth.

*Stephen Blackwood*
*Atlanta, Ga.*

In Gopnik's analysis of Lewis, I was struck by one sentence: "Though Tolkien was certainly a devout Catholic, there is no way in which 'The Lord of the Rings' is a Christian book, much less a Catholic allegory." Setting aside certain textual correspondences—such as similarities to the Virgin Mary in descriptions of Galadriel—a passage from J. R. R. Tolkien's collected letters contradicts this assertion. Tolkien wrote to Robert Murray, in 1953, " 'The Lord of the Rings' is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision.... the religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism." Although Gopnik is right to say that it is not meant as an allegory, it is meant to be deeply Christian.

*Lydia Carr*
*Oxford, England*

Gopnik asserts that "a central point of the Gospel story is that Jesus is not the lion of faith but the lamb of God," and that Aslan is "not just an un-Christian but in many ways an anti-Christian figure." Yet from the beginning of the Gospels (most obviously in Mark and John, and also in Revelation) Jesus is presented as a highly "leonine" figure, whose overwhelming authority and power, manifested in word and deed, are triumphantly vindicated by his resurrection from the dead and ascension to Heaven, where he sits at the right hand of God. That the Lion of Judah should attain his kingdom through self-sacrifice, as the Lamb of God, is no dichotomy but the dramatic paradox at the heart of the New Testament.

*Gavin Dunbar*
*Savannah, Ga.*

## A NEW TRANSLATION

David Remnick shines a welcome spotlight on the neglected art of translation, and is right to praise the achievements of Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky in translating the Russian classics ("The Translation Wars," November 7th). However, there is a significant difference between Pevear and Volokhonsky and their predecessors. Every one of the other Russian translators mentioned (Constance Garnett, Louise and Aylmer Maude, Rosemary Edmonds, and Andrew MacAndrew) was British, and what is partly at issue here is the competing aesthetics of translation. As a Briton working with Russian texts in the United States, I was astonished when an American editor of one of my translations suggested that it should be "rougher." Both the British and the Americans tend to treat foreign authors the way they treat resident foreigners in general—the former by paying them the compliment of turning them into Britons, the latter by allowing them to stay the way they are, with their unfamiliar quirks and customs left fully visible.

*Michael Scammell*
*New York City*

## DEFENDING SULZBERGER

Ken Auletta's article on the *Times* misses the mark in tone and emphasis ("The Inheritance," December 12th). I do not believe that Auletta's piece accurately captures the essence of Arthur Sulzberger, Jr., the New York Times Company chairman, or the success of his leadership from both journalistic and business perspectives. It was his vision to create a national edition of the *Times* which has enabled the newspaper to experience circulation gains at a time when other newspapers have registered declines. For the past five years, the Times Company has been ranked No. 1 in the publishing industry in *Fortune's* Most Admired Companies list, all the while remaining committed to a heritage of quality journalism as evidenced by the twenty-eight Pulitzer Prizes awarded to date during his tenure as publisher. Mr. Sulzberger was prescient in understanding that the Web would transform the media business. Today, NYTimes.com is the largest newspaper Web site in the world and the Times Company has the tenth-largest presence on the Internet. About.com is an important, and profitable, part of the company's Internet strategy. Yes, Mr. Sulzberger has a wonderful sense of humor. But it is his judgment, his commitment to quality journalism, and his desire to grow the company to the benefit of its employees, customers, and shareholders which will be his legacy. Your readers did not get to see this in Auletta's story.

*John Akers*
*Presiding Director, The New York Times Company*
*New York City*

Editors' Note: *The New Yorker's* review of "The City of Falling Angels," by John Berendt (Penguin Press), in the issue of October 3, 2005, incorrectly referred to the "seduction and swindling of Olga Rudge, Ezra Pound's mistress, by the director of the Peggy Guggenheim Collection." This statement was inaccurate, and *The New Yorker* regrets the error.

•

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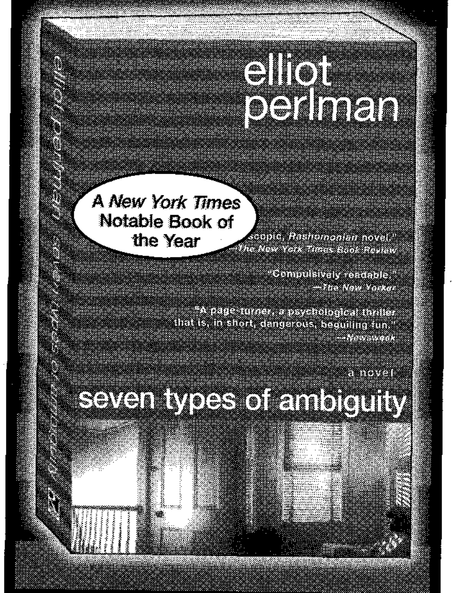
—*Entertainment Weekly*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—*The New Yorker*

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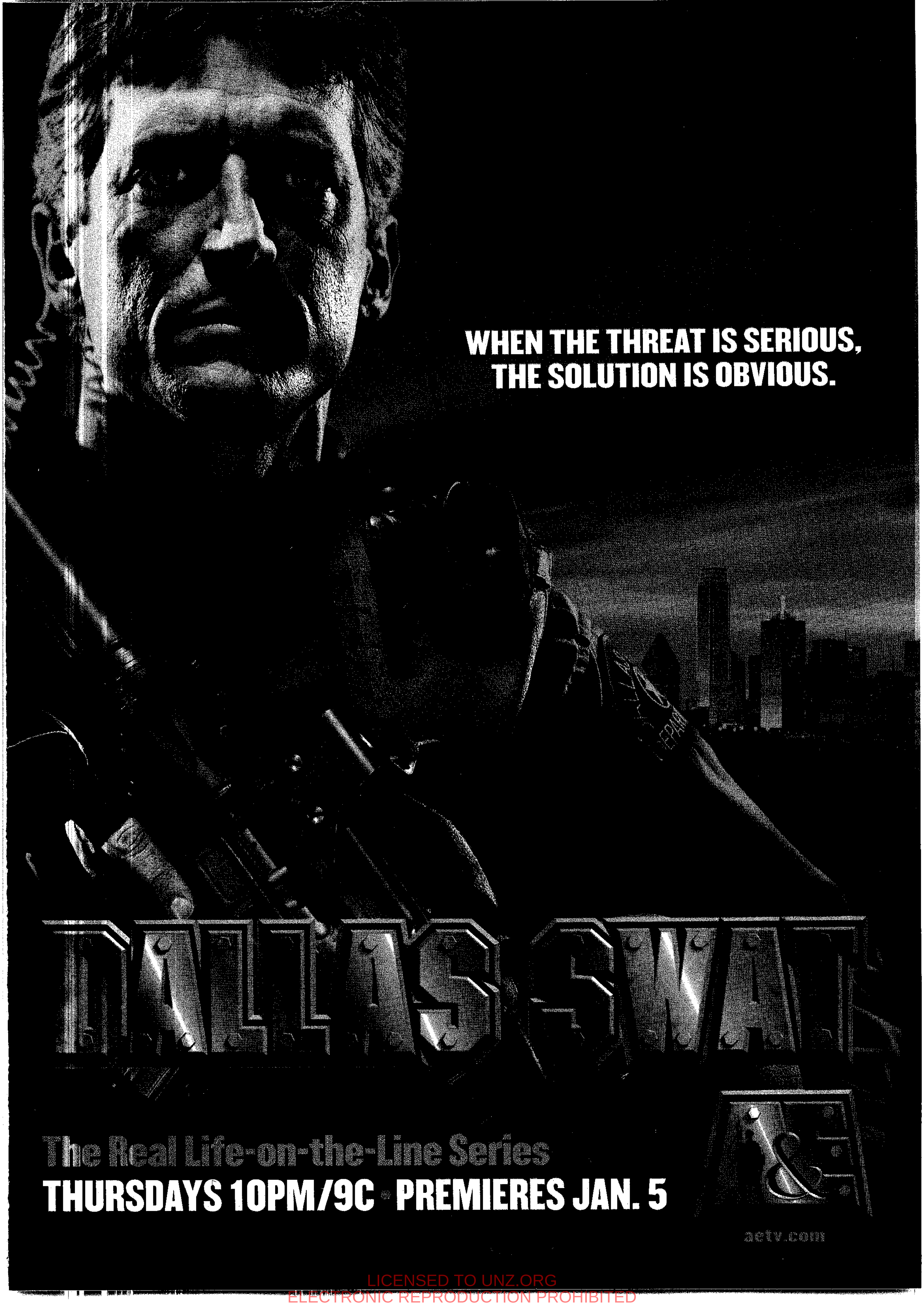
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# GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

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## THIS WEEK

### THE THEATRE
### HAPPY TOGETHER

The Trachtenburg Family Slideshow Players—the singer-songwriter Jason, his slide-projectionist wife, Tina Piña, and their eleven-year-old daughter, Rachel—left their dog-walking business in Seattle to "change the history of music" with their so-bad-it's-good kitsch act. This week, "The Trachtenburg Family Slideshow Players . . . on Ice!" comes to P.S. 122. On Dec. 21, they join John Waters for a Christmas show at Bowery Ballroom. (See pages 20 and 24.)

### NIGHT LIFE
### CLAP YOUR HANDS

This year, the exuberant indie-rock outfit Clap Your Hands Say Yeah rose from obscurity, becoming a household name—at least in broadband-equipped, music-blog-obsessed households—and getting booked on Conan O'Brien's TV show. They make another late-night appearance with a New Year's Eve concert at Irving Plaza. (See page 24.)

### ART
### WALKING, TALKING

Jennifer Crowe and Scott Paterson's interactive audio tour of the Whitney's fifth-foor galleries takes viewers out of the headset bubble and asks them to perform tasks—making scripted comments, walking in circles, etc.—that are used to create a collaborative art project. (See page 28.)

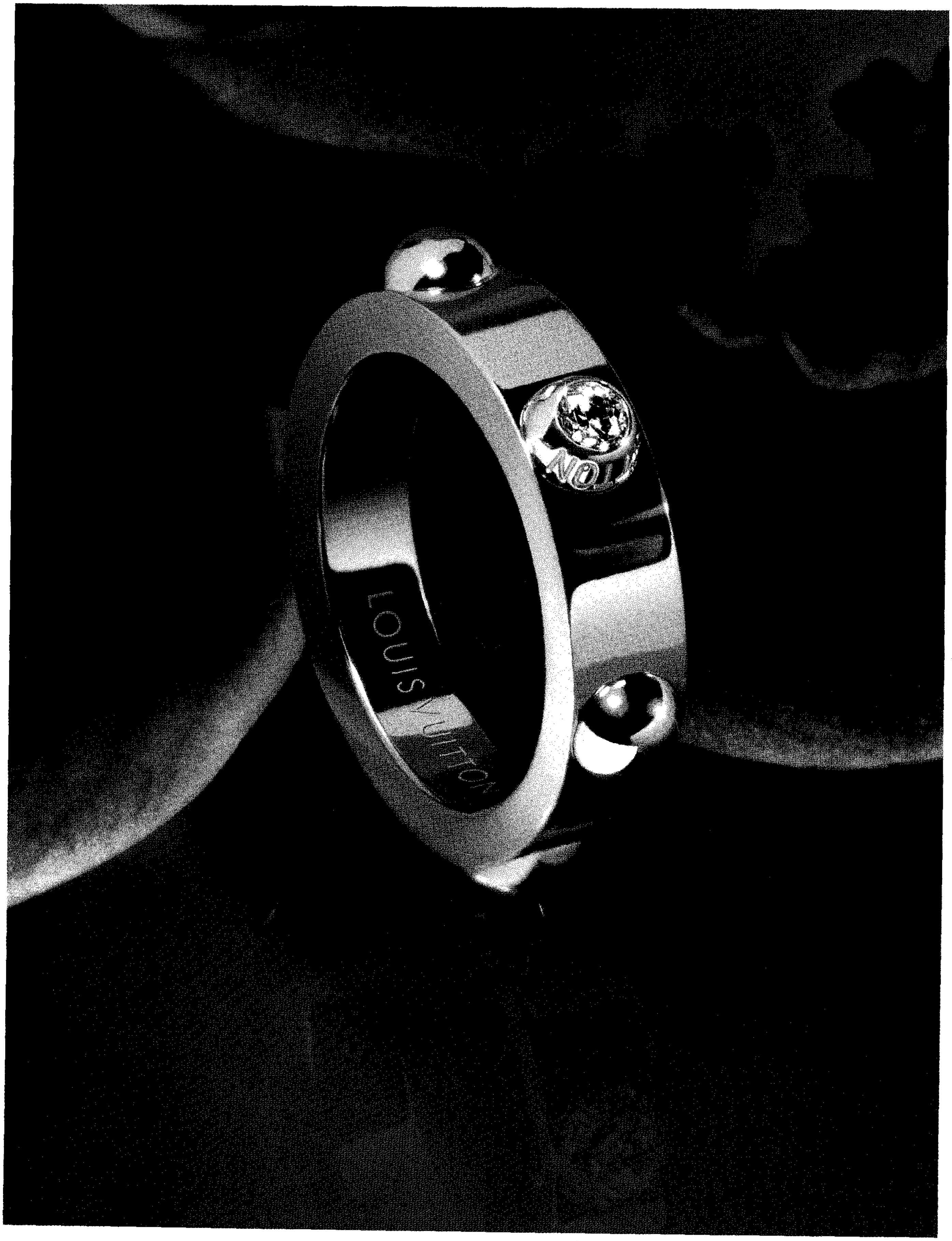
### CLASSICAL MUSIC
### YOUTHFUL SPIRIT

The New York String Orchestra, Carnegie Hall's annual convocation of young virtuosos, performs two concerts, one featuring the violinist Hilary Hahn and another one with the pianist Jonathan Biss. (See page 32.)

### MOVIES
### THREE WOMEN

In 1978, the thirty-two-year-old Rainer Werner Fassbinder began work on "The Marriage of Maria Braun," the first in a trilogy of films about the psychic and political cost of prosperity in the postwar Federal Republic of Germany. Two other films followed: "Lola" and "Veronika Voss." The IFC Center is showing all three over New Year's weekend, with a triple feature on New Year's Day. (See page 38.)

*Stars of "The Radio City Christmas Spectacular." Photograph by Sylvia Plachy.*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## CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK
## NE PLUS ULTRA

There is an oft-repeated truism about the Velvet Underground: very few people bought their début album, but everyone who did started a rock band. There are several analogous works in hip-hop, and one is the Ultramagnetic MC's début album, "Critical Beatdown," from 1988; De La Soul, Wu-Tang Clan, and MF Doom are only a few of the many artists who have drawn inspiration from the record's raw sound and loopy lyrics. The producers Ced Gee and Paul C built the band's rhythm tracks from samples of old soul records, working in a wilderness not yet under the control of copyright lawyers. The songs are full of dirty, crackling drums and the kind of dissonant but felicitous accidents that happen when nobody's read the manual. And there is no possibility of even finding a manual for an m.c. like Kool Keith, who often leaves sense entirely behind for lighthearted non sequiturs. The MC's—who have re-formed and will appear at the Knitting Factory on Dec. 23—were out of step with hip-hop when they began. They're still on their own planet, though now they have some company.

—*Sasha Frere-Jones*

## THE THEATRE
## OPENINGS AND PREVIEWS

*Please call the phone number listed with the theatre for timetables and ticket information.*

**ALMOST, MAINE**
A romantic comedy set in a remote northern town, by John Cariani. Directed by Gabriel Barre. In previews. (Daryl Roth, 101 E. 15th St. 212-239-6200.)

**BEAUTY OF THE FATHER**
Manhattan Theatre Club presents the New York première of a play by Nilo Cruz ("Anna in the Tropics"), about a woman who travels to Spain to reconnect with her father. Michael Greif ("Rent") directs. In previews. (131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212.)

**CANDIDA**
The Jean Cocteau Repertory's season of "five classic women" continues with George Bernard Shaw's 1904 sendup of the institution of marriage. In previews. Opens Dec. 28. (Bouwerie Lane, 330 Bowery. 212-279-4200.)

**THE LITTLE DOG LAUGHED**
A new comedy by Douglas Carter Beane, about a closeted gay Hollywood star. In previews. (Second Stage, 307 W. 43rd St. 212-246-4422.)

**THE TRACHTENBURG FAMILY SLIDESHOW PLAYERS . . . ON ICE!**
Jason Trachtenburg, his fashion-designer spouse, Tina Piña, and their eleven-year-old daughter, Rachel (drummer, vocalist, and raconteur), perform their music-filled variety show. Dec. 20-23. (P.S. 122, at 150 First Ave. 212-352-3101.)

## NOW PLAYING

**ABIGAIL'S PARTY**
In the New Group's New York première of Mike Leigh's 1977 comedy, Jennifer Jason Leigh makes a fiendishly good turn as Beverly, the self-appointed It Girl of the London suburbs and, as her unfortunate party guests discover, an excruciating shrew whose beguilements are the frilly instruments of doom. In fact, everyone who enters Beverly's presence—including her beleaguered husband (the excellent Max Baker) and an assortment of unwitting neighbors—appears to be long-suffering. As the group loses its collective good sense to gin, Beverly's soirée goes thoroughly south and the comedy grows blacker. By then, the play is nearly drunk on its own caustic abandon, but, in the able hands of the director, Scott Elliott ("Hurlyburly"), it offers an uneasy portrait of middle-class implosion. (Acorn, 410 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200.)

**APPARITION**
Five ghost stories written by Anne Washburn are performed by an ensemble cast that includes T. Ryder Smith. (Connelly, 220 E. 4th St. 212-352-3101.)

**BUSH IS BAD**
There's plenty of unabashed liberal venting but precious few laughs in Joshua Rosenblum's cabaret spoof, which aims to palliate the "blue-state blues" by lampooning every available stripe of Republican hypocrisy. Aside from Jill Abramovitz's madcap portrayal of Ann Coulter, whom she plays as a shrieking, malevolent harpy, much of the show seems stale, its targets either dated (Katherine Harris) or overplayed (W's mangled grammar). (Triad, 158 W. 72nd St. 212-352-3101.)

**CELEBRATION / THE ROOM**
A fascinating Harold Pinter double bill (well directed by Neil Pepe, at the Atlantic Theatre Company), brings together his first play, "The Room" (1957), and "Celebration" (1999). In "The Room," a jejune and portentous one-act, Pinter stumbled on a psychological truth that he continued to explore brilliantly for half a century: mankind's passion for ignorance. In "Celebration," which takes place at two adjacent banquettes of an elegant restaurant, language is the main character. With mockery, weasel words, tall tales, the syncopation of repetition, and, of course, a carapace of pauses, the characters perform a sensational exercise in denial. The silence—the force that compels all of Pinter's manic motormouths—is huge, terrifying, and, in Pinter's masterly hands, visionary. (Reviewed in our issue of 12/19/05.) (336 W. 20th St. 212-239-6200.)

**CHITA RIVERA: THE DANCER'S LIFE**
Rivera, supported by a cast of ten, stars in a musical about her life and career, touching on shows by Jerome Robbins, Leonard Bernstein, and Bob Fosse. With a book by Terrence McNally. Directed and choreographed by Graciela Daniele. (Shoenfeld, 236 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

**A CHRISTMAS CAROL**
Theatreworks' musical based on the Dickens classic. (Lucille Lortel, 121 Christopher St. 212-279-4200. Through Dec. 31.)

**THE COLOR PURPLE**
Overamplified, overheated, and overhyped, this noisy musical was adapted from Alice Walker's 1982 novel, about an abused and stifled young woman named Celie (the compelling LaChanze), who has been systematically stripped of her identity. Jon Lee Beatty has designed some gorgeous backdrops and Donald Byrd's choreography has its dashing moments, yet, under Gary Griffin's direction, the show moves quickly but picks up no momentum. It seems that the production team hasn't thought deeply enough about what lies underneath the characters' story, and there's something inert at its core. (12/12/05) (Broadway Theatre, Broadway at 53rd St. 212-239-6200.)

**DOG SEES GOD: CONFESSIONS OF A TEENAGE BLOCKHEAD**
In an acid little comedy by Bert V. Royal, the "Peanuts" gang has evolved into a group of depraved, damaged high schoolers—Linus is now a stoner who has toked the remains of his blanket, Sally has gone goth, and Charlie Brown (Eddie Kaye Thomas, of the "American Pie" movies) is, as ever, in the awkward throes of his own befuddled existence. (Best not to ask about Snoopy.) Sly in-jokes and the thrill of sacrilege provide the fuel for this Fringe Festival transfer, but when the play takes a darker turn toward suicide and homophobic hate crime, even the most irreverent Charles Schulz fans may shudder. Directed by Trip Cullman. (Century Center for the Performing Arts, 111 E. 15th St. 212-239-6200.)

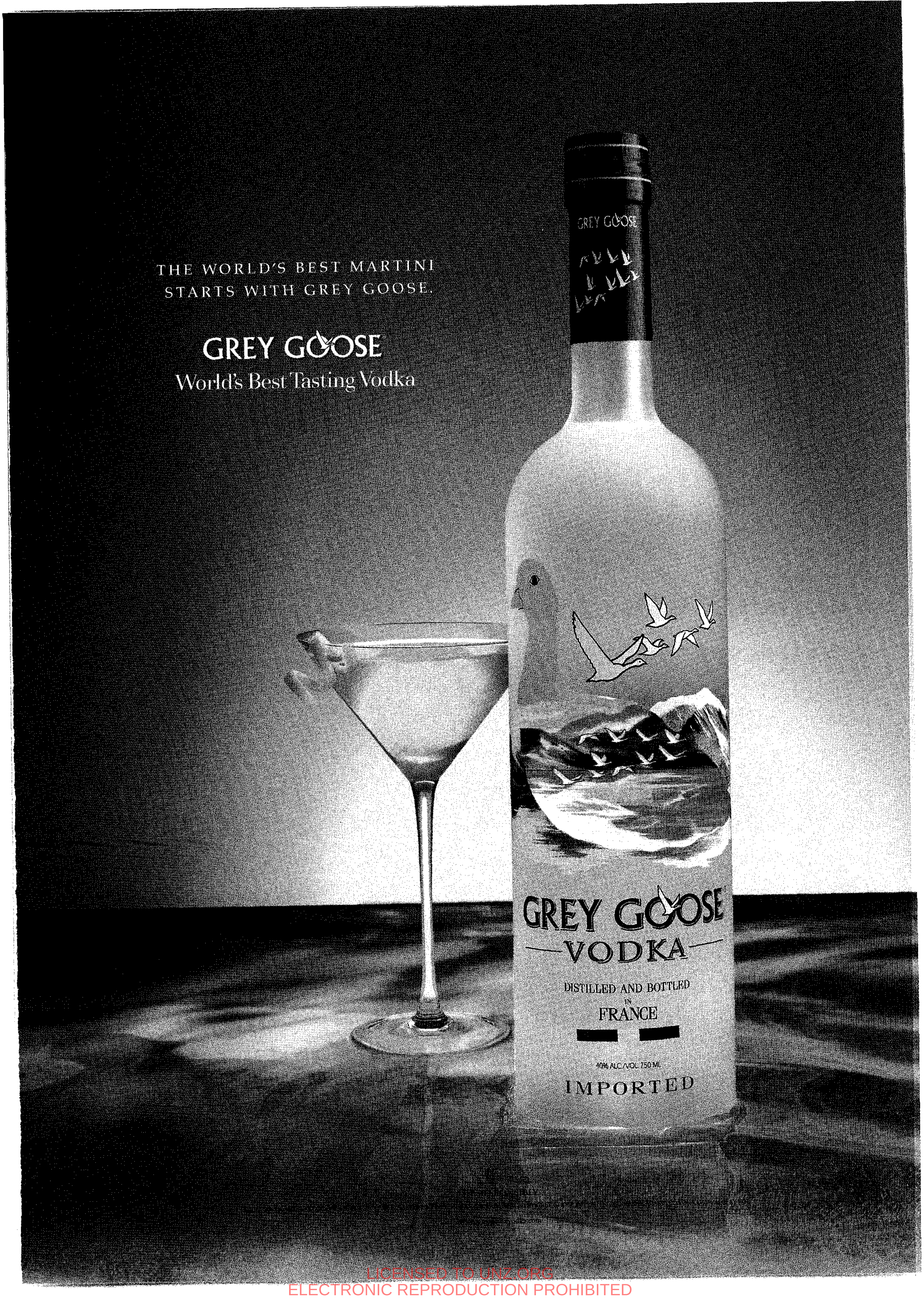
**HIS ROYAL HIPNESS LORD BUCKLEY IN THE ZAM ZAM ROOM**
A hot-jazz trio backs the entrancing Jake Broder as he bops through the nineteen-fifties cult lounge performer Lord Buckley's resurrected spoken-word riffs on the Swinging Pied Piper, Jesus of Nazareth ("the Nazz"), and the Gettysburg Address. Broder gives Buckley none of the standup comic's yearning to be liked; he works the room not for laughs but for moments of mind-expanding exhilaration. (59E59, at 59 E. 59th St. 212-279-4200. Through Dec. 31.)

**IN THE CONTINUUM**
The fiery young performers Danai Gurira and Nikkole Salter have moved to the Perry Street Theatre with their intelligent (and often comedic) play about the economic dependency, social stigma, and family pressure faced by black women with H.I.V. (31 Perry St. 212-868-4444.)

**KLONSKY AND SCHWARTZ**
Romulus Linney's witty, talky play is about two men who have a way with words—the doomed and gifted New York poet Delmore Schwartz (played by the excellent Bill Wise) and his younger friend Milton Klonsky (Chris Ceraso), a frustrated writer who becomes a kind of guardian angel to the disintegrating poet. Linney's text quotes liberally from Schwartz's late poems, whose words upstage the patter of the play. Directed by Jamie Richards. (Ensemble Studio Theatre, 549 W. 52nd St. 212-352-3101. Through Dec. 23.)

**MEASURE FOR MEASURE**
This all-male production from Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, in London, directed by John Dove, gives one of the playwright's darkest comedies a light heart. The Duke (Mark Rylance) has left Vienna, leaving Angelo (a smoldering Liam Brennan) to govern; bent on cleaning up the licentious city,

MAXIMILIAN BODE



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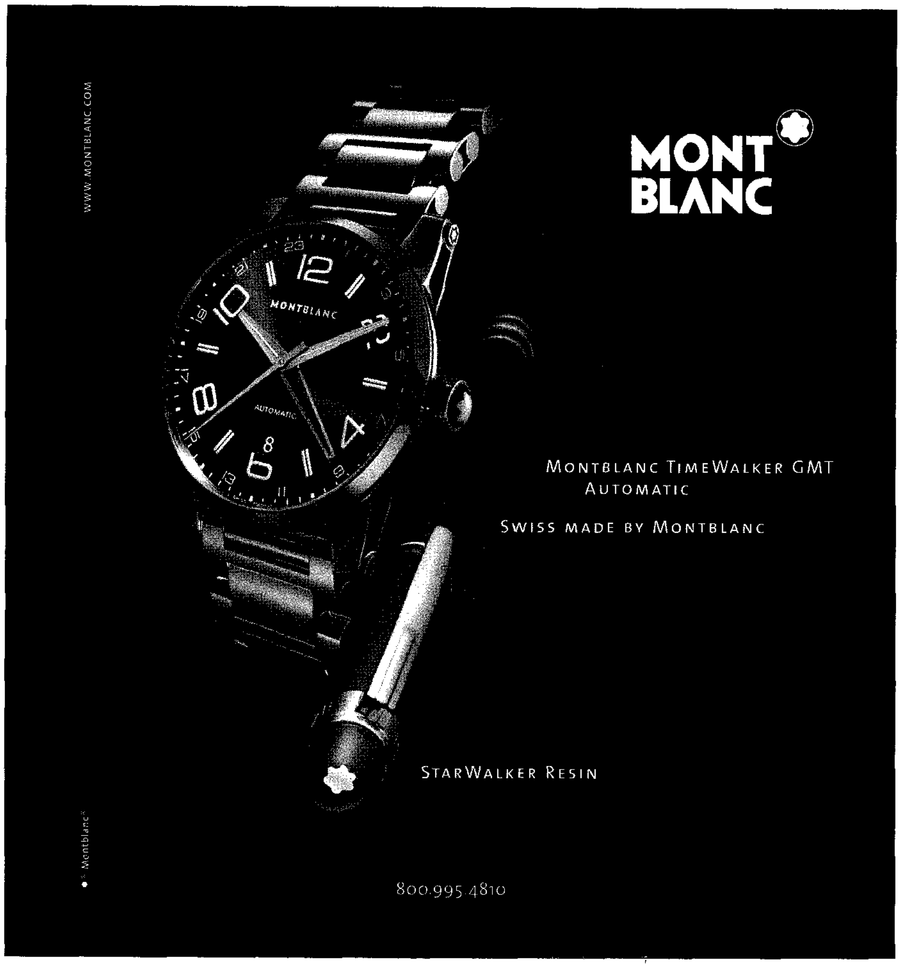

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Angelo sentences Claudio (David Sturzaker) to death for impregnating a woman out of wedlock but offers clemency in return for a night with Claudio's sister Isabella (elegantly played by Edward Hogg). Rylance, in his last appearances as the company's artistic director, gives a masterly comedic performance as the stammering, soft-spoken Duke, who works, disguised as a monk, to put all to right. The occasional jig and excellent musical accompaniment on period instruments add an extra layer of froth. (St. Ann's Warehouse, 38 Water St. 718-254-8779. Through Jan. 1.)

**MISS WITHERSPOON**

In Christopher Durang's latest existential capriccio (directed by Emily Mann, at Playwrights Horizons), Miss Witherspoon (played by the expert Kristine Nielsen) rants at us mostly from the netherworld, where she can't seem to catch a karmic break: she is sent back to earth in various reincarnations as, among other things, a wife of Rex Harrison, a yapping dog, and the baby of redneck drug addicts. Every time she is reincarnated, she kills herself. With this kind of comic conceit, where anything can happen, but only to one character, a certain monotony is bound to set in—which Durang, who is a funny man, postpones with some goofy stage business. Giddy with apocalyptic fear and loathing, Durang's play seems an augury that the fin has come early to this siècle. (12/12/05) (416 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200. Through Jan. 1.)

**MR. MARMALADE**

In Noah Haidle's exhilarating new play (well directed by Michael Greif), which is reminiscent of a 2002 article by Adam Gopnik for this magazine entitled "Bumping Into Mr. Ravioli," the title character is the imaginary friend of a lively but neglected four-year-old called Lucy (Mamie Gummer, making her impressive Off Broadway début). Mr. Marmalade (Michael C. Hall) is a buttoned-down, briefcase-toting simulacrum, one suspects, of Lucy's absent father. Although grownups occasionally intrude on Lucy's busy world—she's the only child of a divorced mother in suburban New Jersey—the events of the play mainly concern the games with which she peoples her solitude, and Lucy's pretensions to adulthood are alternately hilarious and heartbreaking. (12/5/05) (Laura Pels, 111 W. 46th St. 212-719-1300.)

**MRS. WARREN'S PROFESSION**

George Bernard Shaw's play, about a young woman who learns that her mother's wealth is derived from a less than respectable métier, stars Dana Ivey. Directed by Charlotte Moore. (Irish Repertory, 132 W. 22nd St. 212-727-2737.)

**THE OTHER SIDE**

In Manhattan Theatre Club's production of a new play by Ariel Dorfman ("Death and the Maiden"), John Cullum and Rosemary Harris play an elderly husband and wife waiting anxiously for the end of a decades-long war and for the return of their runaway son. When an armistice is finally negotiated, the new borderline runs straight through the couple's bedroom, relegating them to either side of their ramshackle home. Dorfman's work often deals with the ambiguous emotional fallout of political strife—but when his open-ended dramas are matched with unspecific acting, as they are here, the dialogue loses its potency for subtext. In fact, Beowulf Boritt's evocative set, which contrasts warm hues of red and turquoise with the bleak grayness of the surrounding world, has more texture and surprise than Blanka Zizka's direction. (131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212.)

**ROPE**

Patrick Hamilton's brilliantly structured 1929 thriller about a Leopold-and-Loeb-like murder still tingles with well-earned suspense. This Drama Dept. production unwisely outs the homosexual spoiled-boy murderers, depriving the actors of all that charged subtext, but, even so, this is taut drama. David Warren's shrewd direction uncovers the play's handsome symmetries, and Zak Orth's mesmerizing turn as the supercilious prig Rupert Cadell lays bare the vain, melancholy soul of a reluctant humanist. (Zipper, 336 W. 37th St. 212-239-6200.)

**SEASCAPE**
Edward Albee's nostalgic Pulitzer Prize-winning play, from 1975, about two couples who meet on a beach and contemplate life, death, and evolution, stars Frances Sternhagen and the excellent George Grizzard as the elderly couple who wax poetic about what to do with the time on their hands, and Elizabeth Marvel and Frederick Weller as the curious, innocent sea creatures they encounter. (Booth, 222 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

**STRIKING 12**
Ted Sperling directs this rock-musical-comedy rendition of Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Match Girl." With a book by Rachel Sheinkin. (Ars Nova, 511 W. 54th St. 212-868-4444. Through Dec. 23.)

**SWEENEY TODD**
Under the bold direction and design of John Doyle, this imported British revival at the Eugene O'Neill, which shrinks the cast of thirty to ten, with actors doubling as musicians, is almost unbearably exciting. Michael Cerveris is a terrifying Sweeney, a model of sulfurous restraint, and Patti LuPone, as his pragmatic and pathological helpmate, Mrs. Lovett, is a gargoyle of toughness. (11/14/05) (230 W. 49th St. 212-239-6200.)

**THIS WAY THAT WAY**
A comic duo on the run dream of bringing their act to the New York stage, in this action-adventure musical directed by Mark Lonergan. (59E59, at 59 E. 59th St. 212-279-4200. Through Dec. 31.)

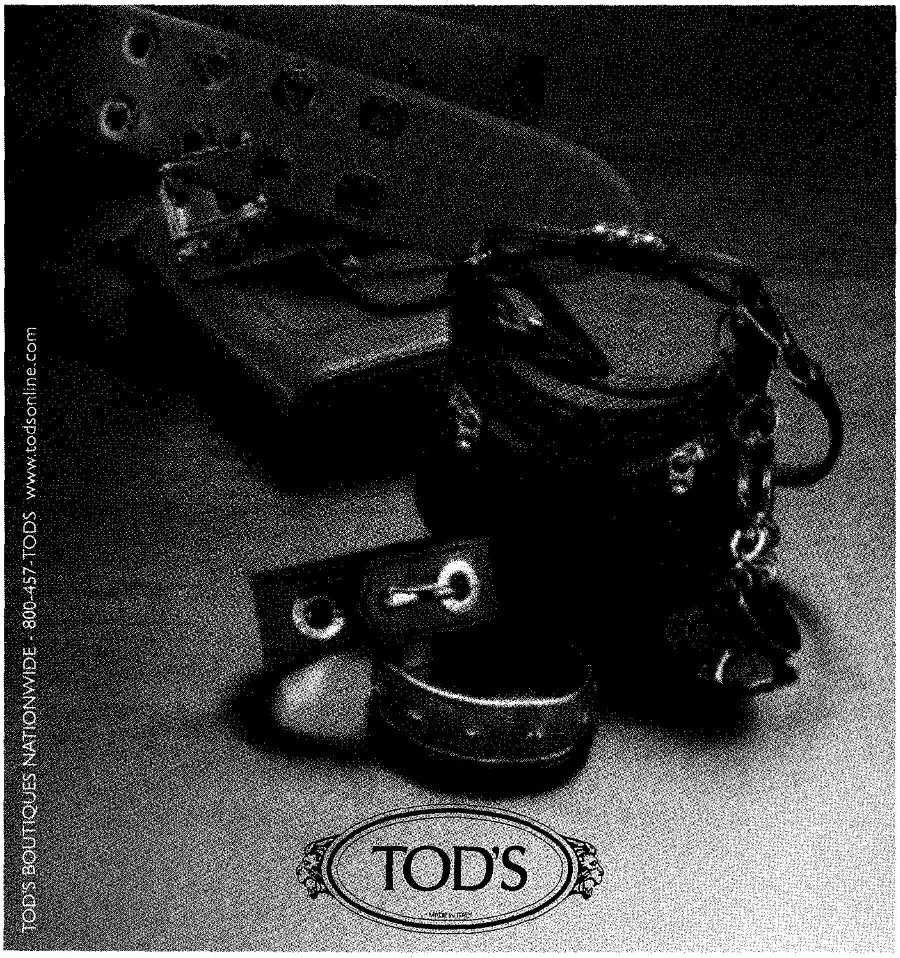
**TIGHT EMBRACE**
Set in a nameless Latin-American country, Jorge Ignacio Cortiñas's play sets up a situation fraught with tension: a naïve guard (Andrés Munar) armed with a rifle watches over a motherly prisoner (the superbly wily Mia Katigbak), their evolving relationship the result of a kidnapping. She's learned the rules of her captors so well that she helps the young guard commit them to memory. Eventually, he recollects the only rule she's omitted: "If the prisoner sees my face, kill the prisoner." From these promising beginnings, Cortiñas's eloquent playwriting somehow squanders its taut pacing, lingering where it needs to be quick and merciless. Lisa Peterson directs. (Kirk, 410 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200. Through Dec. 31.)

**A TOUCH OF THE POET**
In the Roundabout production (under the direction of Doug Hughes) of the 1936 Eugene O'Neill play, set in 1828, the braggadocio of the well-nicknamed Con Melody (the admirable Gabriel Byrne)—an Irishman who clings to his aristocratic posture, even though he is the hapless owner of a dingy tavern outside Boston—nearly destroys his household. The play is overwrought and overwritten: O'Neill can describe Con's self-delusion, but he can't penetrate it. And despite fine support from Dearbhla Molloy, as Con's long-suffering wife, and Byron Jennings, as his boozy sidekick, the play hardly ever comes alive. (12/19/05) (Studio 54, at 254 W. 54th St. 212-719-1300.)

**THE TRIP TO BOUNTIFUL**
A beautifully realized production of Horton Foote's classic play about the longing to reach backward to a time of surety. Lois Smith portrays Carrie Watts with a luminous purity and slight befuddlement, making her quest to return, before her death, to the tiny Texas farm town of her birth an almost heroic one. Obstacles abound: Mrs. Watts has a heart condition and, even worse, a shrewish daughter-in-law (Hallie Foote) who keeps her shut up in blindingly close quarters. When the old lady runs away via Greyhound bus, you want to applaud her courage and faith in the kindness of strangers. Within this sterling production by the director Harris Yulin, such faith is not only possible, but necessary. (Peter Norton Space, 555 W. 42nd St. 212-244-7529.)

**'TWAS THE NIGHT BEFORE THE TWELVE DAYS OF A NUT CRACKER CHRISTMAS CAROL**
Four Christmas favorites in one, in a downtown dance-and-theatre spectacular. (P.S. 122, at 150 First Ave. 212-352-3101. Through Dec. 30.)

**THE WOMAN IN WHITE**
In Andrew Lloyd Webber's latest offering, adapted by Charlotte Jones from Wilkie Collins's creepy nineteenth-century novel and directed by Trevor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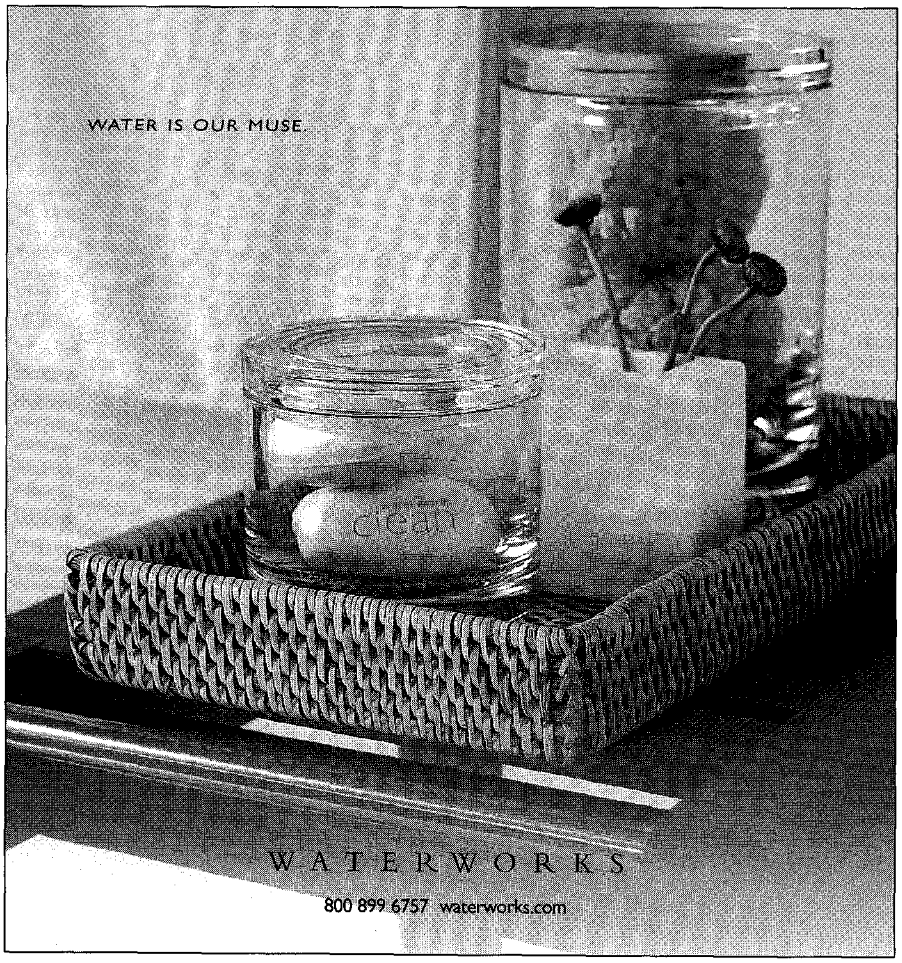
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Nunn, it's not easy to judge the actors or the play because they're all of a piece, and the score and the lyrics (by David Zippel) are so over-the-top dramatic that it's impossible to have real feeling for any of the characters, let alone their situations. (11/28/05) (Marquis, Broadway at 45th St. 212-307-4100.)

### *Also Playing*

**ALTAR BOYZ:** Dodger Stages, 340 W. 50th St. 212-239-6200. **AVENUE Q:** Golden, 252 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. **CHICAGO:** Ambassador, 219 W. 49th St. 212-239-6200. **DIRTY ROTTEN SCOUNDRELS:** Imperial, 249 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. **DOUBT:** Walter Kerr, 219 W. 48th St. 212-239-6200. **FIDDLER ON THE ROOF:** Minskoff, 200 W. 45th St. 212-307-4100. **FOOLS IN LOVE:** Manhattan Ensemble Theatre, 55 Mercer St. 212-239-6200. **HAIRSPRAY:** Neil Simon, 250 W. 52nd St. 212-307-4100. **JERSEY BOYS:** August Wilson, 245 W. 52nd St. 212-239-6200. **THE LIGHT IN THE PIAZZA:** Vivian Beaumont, Lincoln Center. 212-239-6200. **MAMMA MIA!:** Winter Garden, Broadway at 50th St. 212-239-6200. **MONTY PYTHON'S SPAMALOT:** Shubert, 225 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200. **THE ODD COUPLE:** Brooks Atkinson, 256 W. 47th St. 212-307-4100. **ON SECOND AVENUE:** J.C.C., 334 Amsterdam Ave. 212-239-6200. Through Jan. 1. **ORSON'S SHADOW:** Barrow Street Theatre, 27 Barrow St. 212-239-6200. Through Dec. 31. **PETER PAN:** Theatre at Madison Square Garden, 4 Penn Plaza. 212-307-1000. Through Dec. 30. **RFK:** The Culture Project, 45 Bleecker St. 212-307-4100. **SOUVENIR:** Lyceum, 149 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. **SWEET CHARITY:** Al Hirschfeld, 302 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. Through Dec. 31. **THOM PAIN (BASED ON NOTHING):** DR2, 103 E. 15th St. 212-239-6200. Through Dec. 31. **THE 25TH ANNUAL PUTNAM COUNTY SPELLING BEE:** Circle in the Square, 50th St. between Broadway and Eighth Ave. 212-239-6200. **WAITING FOR GODOT:** Theatre at St. Clement's, 423 W. 46th St. 212-239-6200. **WICKED:** Gershwin, 222 W. 51st St. 212-307-4100.

## NIGHT LIFE
## ROCK AND POP

*Musicians and night-club proprietors live complicated lives; it's advisable to call ahead to confirm engagements.*

**B. B. KING BLUES CLUB & GRILL**
237 W. 42nd St. (212-997-4144)—Dec. 22: **Terry Reid,** the veteran English singer and guitarist (who was almost part of the band that became Led Zeppelin) is affectionately known as Super Lungs. Dec. 26: The **School of Rock Music All Stars.** Before Jack Black lit up the big screen as a rocker turned teacher, Paul Green was instructing the preteen set in the fine art of the power chord in Philadelphia. His top students perform a Boxing Day show. Dec. 31: **James Brown,** Soul Brother No. 1.

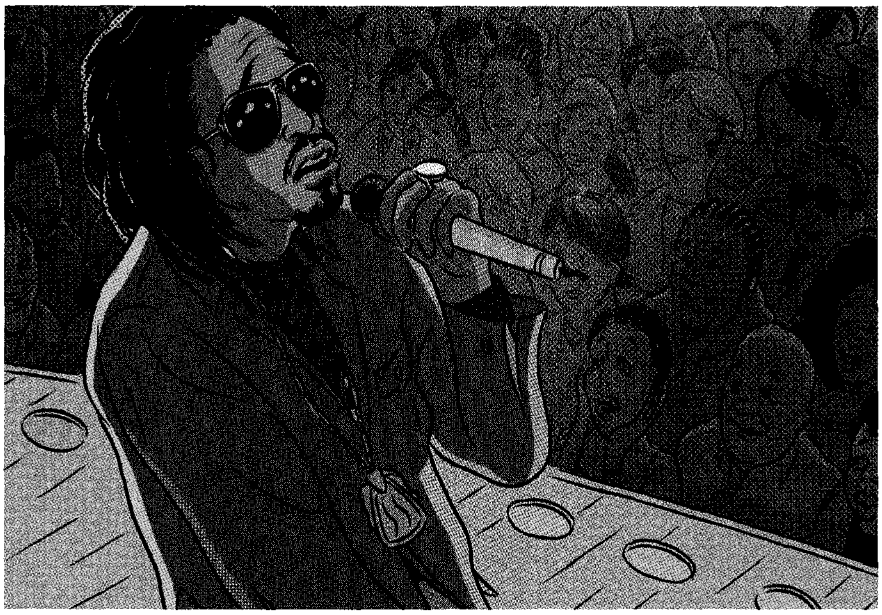
**BEACON THEATRE**
Broadway at 74th St. (212-307-7171)—Dec. 29-31: **Gov't Mule,** the bristling Allman Brothers offshoot led by the slide guitarist Warren Haynes.

**BOWERY BALLROOM**
6 Delancey St. (212-533-2111)—Dec. 21: The legendary underground director **John Waters** stops by with a Christmas show. Leave the kids at home for this one. With the anti-folk singer **Kimya Dawson** and the **Trachtenburg Family Slideshow Players,** whose eleven-year-old drummer, Rachel, is sure to have a fruitful second career as a memoirist. Dec. 30-31: **Patti Smith** and her band, fresh from back-to-back performances of her thirty-year-old album, "Horses," at the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

**CARNEGIE HALL**
57th St. at Seventh Ave. (212-247-7800)—Dec. 21: The Canadian sisters **Kate** and **Anna McGarrigle,** who first came to national attention three decades ago when Linda Ronstadt took their song "Heart Like a Wheel" to the top of the country and pop charts, celebrate the holidays with their literal and musical families. Among the many guests are Kate's children, **Martha** and **Rufus Wainwright,** along with **Teddy Thompson** and **Emmylou Harris.**

**IRVING PLAZA**
17 Irving Pl., at 15th St. (212-777-6800)—Dec. 31: An indie-rock fan's dream night, with the charming—and charmed—five-piece **Clap Your Hands Say Yeah,** the sibling rockers the **National,** and Philadelphia's **Dr. Dog.**

**JOE'S PUB**
425 Lafayette St. (212-539-8777)—Dec. 20-21: **Los Straitjackets,** known for wearing colorful Mexican wrestling masks and playing crashing surf-rock instrumentals, present a Christmas pageant, which features **Kaiser George,** of the Scottish combo the Kaisers, and the **World Famous Pontani Sisters,** a major metro-area burlesque dance troupe. Dec. 22: The all-woman klezmer outfit **Isle of Klezbos** tests the elasticity of the genre by mixing the traditional Jewish wedding music with merengue, swing jazz, and other diverse musical elements. Dec. 23: The smooth-voiced singer **Reggie Watts,** formerly the front man for the Seattle soul combo Maktub. With the absurdist alternative comedian and local favorite **Eugene Mirman.** Dec. 23: Anchored by Oren Bloedow's atmospheric guitars and Jennifer Charles's smoky, sensuous voice, **Elysian Fields** is a local ensemble that delivers silkily erotic music.


*The versatile R. & B. vocalist Bilal brings his show to S.O.B.'s on Dec. 27.*

MICKEY DUZYJ

**KNITTING FACTORY**
74 Leonard St., between Broadway and Church St. (212-219-3055)—Dec. 23: The **Ultramagnetic MC's.** Back in the eighties, the Bronx-based group helped expand hip-hop with its use of samplers—which record and play back looped sound bites at different pitches—and by its use of guitar, keyboard, drums, and other live instruments. The local heroes are back together for their second show in nearly a decade, and a new album is expected next spring. Dec. 24-25: The musical review **"What I Like About Jew"** takes a slightly different look at the most wonderful time of the year: its Christmas Eve and Christmas Day shows feature "Reuben the Hook-Nosed Reindeer," "(It's Good to Be) A Jew at Christmas," and other future holiday classics. Dec. 31: The tense guitar rock of New York's own **Radio 4.**

**MADISON SQUARE GARDEN**
Seventh Ave. at 33rd St. (212-307-7171)—Dec. 31: The **Black Crowes** ring in the New Year with a stab at some old-fashioned Zeppelinesque hedonism. With the North Mississippi Allstars.

**MAXWELL'S**
1039 Washington St., Hoboken (201-653-1703)—Dec. 25-Jan. 1: The Hoboken favorites **Yo La Tengo** celebrate Hanukkah.

**MERCURY LOUNGE**
217 E. Houston St. (212-260-4700)—Dec 21: **Alice Texas** is Alice Schneider, a native New Yorker who rides through the oppressively small towns and dry prairies of her imagination searching for love and redemption. Her sidekicks this time out are the guitarist Peter Mavrogeorgis and the drummer Douglas Hodges. With the bounding pop of **Johnny Society.** Dec. 29: **Champale,** a flexible and inventive ensemble led by the local singer, songwriter, and men's-fashion journalist Mark Rozzo, used to cover the territory from meditative spaciness to full-bore freakout, sometimes in one tune. The band's been on hiatus for the past two years, but it's back for one night, complete with vibes, horns, strings, and who knows how many guest musicians. Dec. 31: The shimmering guitars of **Ambulance Ltd.**

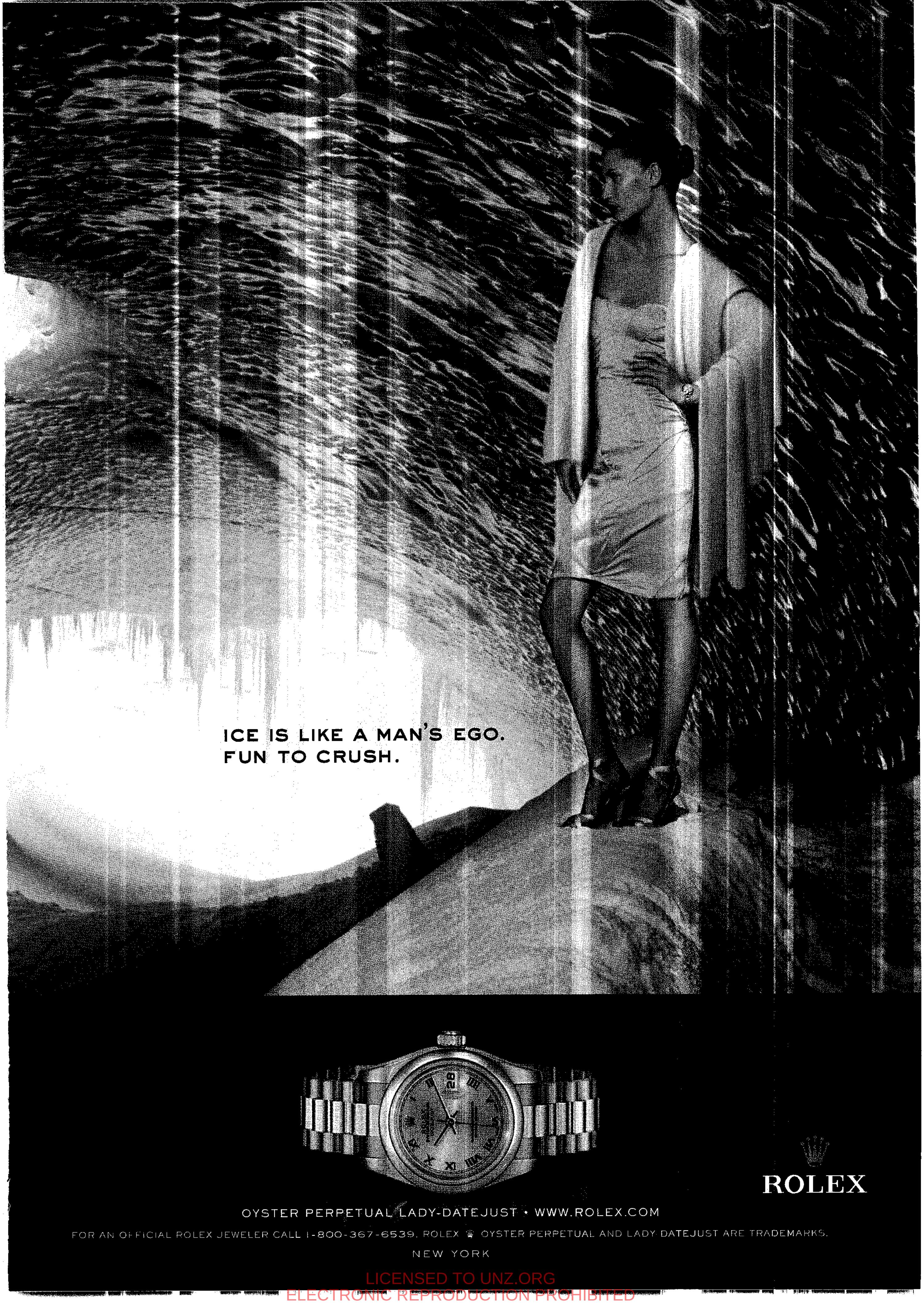
**S.O.B.'S**
204 Varick St., at W. Houston St. (212-243-4940)—Dec. 27: The young Philadelphia-born vocalist **Bilal** has appeared on albums by the hip-hop stars Common and Erykah Badu. His début album, "1st Born Second," came out four years ago. The record deftly combined streams of jazz, hip-hop, funk, and soul, and Bilal, who was classically trained in opera, is comfortable singing falsetto, scatting, or laying down a smooth hip-hop verse.

## JAZZ AND STANDARDS

**AVALON**
47 W. 20th St. (212-807-7780)—Dec. 28: The "Holiday Swing Ball," featuring **Nick Palumbo & the Flipped Fedoras, Ron Sunshine & Full Swing,** and **Eight to the Bar,** provides a bit of post-Christmas dance relief.

**BIRDLAND**
315 W. 44th St. (212-581-3080)—Dec. 21-24: **Freddy Cole,** who channels the subtle vocal phrasing and piano styling of his brother Nat while retaining his own distinct identity, presents a holiday program.

**BLUE NOTE**
131 W. 3rd St., near Sixth Ave. (212-475-8592)—Dec. 20-25: As the house pianist at Jilly's, one of Frank Sinatra's favorite New York hangouts in the mid-sixties, the pianist **Monty Alexander** had direct contact with the great man himself. For this holiday engagement, Alexander offers a program of Sinatra-related songs, assisted by a number of guests, including the saxophonists **Jimmy Heath,** on Dec. 21, and **Houston Person,** on the 25th. Dec. 27-31: The smoky-voiced singer **Cassandra Wilson,** known for dipping lustily into pop, blues, and original material.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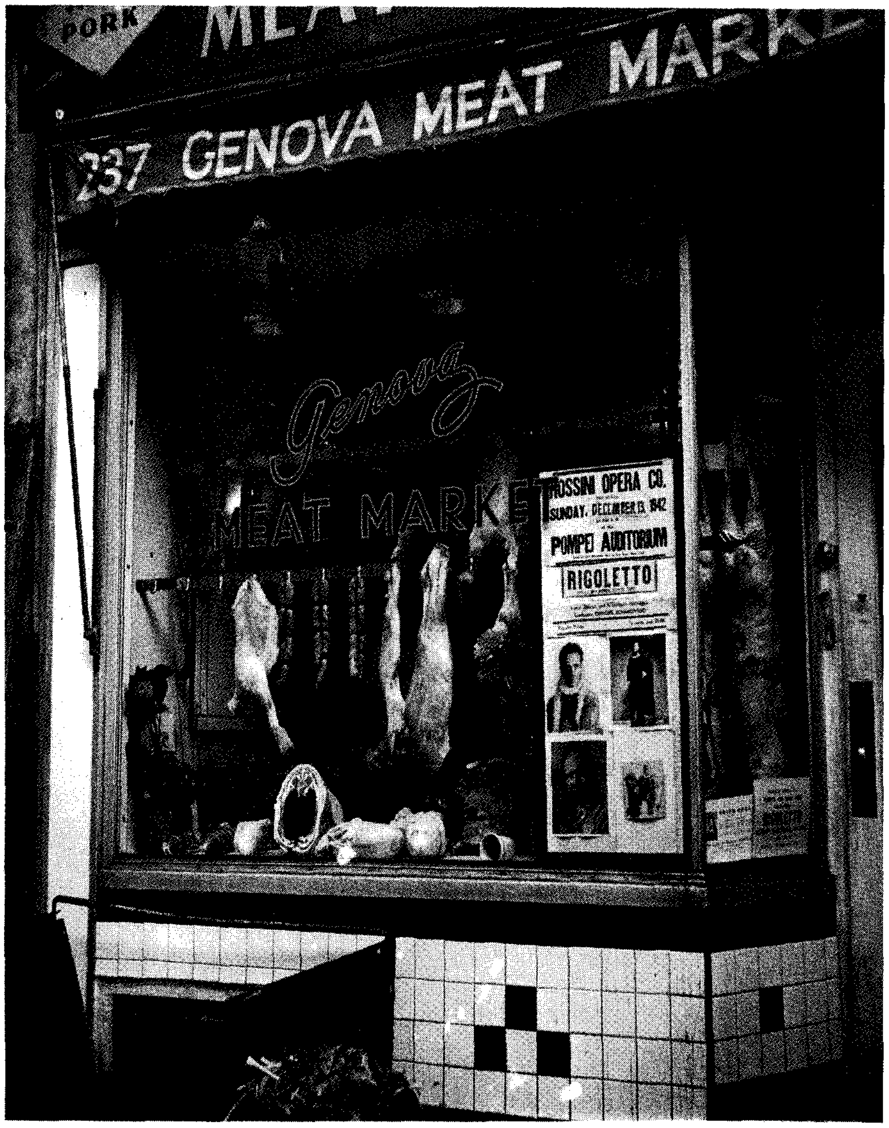

*"Genova Meat Market," circa 1935, by Therese Mitchell, wife of the longtime New Yorker contributor Joseph Mitchell, at 84 Mercer.*

**CARLYLE HOTEL**
Madison Ave. at 76th St. (212-744-1600)—The Café Carlyle, a snug, windowless enclave in the doorman district, features discreet waiters, wraparound murals, and, through Dec. 31, the vocalist **Steve Tyrell.**

**DIZZY'S CLUB COCA-COLA**
Broadway at 60th St. (212-258-9595)—Dec. 20-25: The gifted singer **Vanessa Rubin** performs the work of the pioneering bebop composer and arranger Tadd Dameron in a seasonal program. Dec. 27-Jan. 1: The Cuban-born woodwind virtuoso **Paquito D'Rivera** sends 2005 out in style.

**IRIDIUM**
1650 Broadway, at 51st St. (212-582-2121)—Dec. 21-25: Jimmy Smith, the patriarch of the Hammond B3 electric organ, died earlier this year, but three of his most devoted disciples, **Dr. Lonnie Smith, Jimmy McGriff,** and **Reuben Wilson,** will be on hand for Organ Summit Part III. Mondays belong to the electric-guitar innovator **Les Paul.** The **Mingus Big Band** takes over on Tuesdays.

**JAZZ GALLERY**
290 Hudson St., near Spring St. (212-242-1063)—The trumpeter **Roy Hargrove,** a good friend of this intrepid club devoted to up-and-coming performers, fronts a big band Dec. 28-30 and an ad-hoc unit of talented associates on the 31st.

**JAZZ STANDARD**
116 E. 27th St. (212-576-2232)—Dec. 20-23: **Ben Riley's Monk Legacy Septet.** A Thelonious Monk tribute band without a pianist? Trust the trumpeter, arranger, and general conceptualist **Don Sickler** to score Monk's masterpieces for four horns and a guitar. With the Monk-band veteran Riley on the drums, swing is a given. Dec. 27-31: The **Preservation Hall Jazz Band.** Hurricane Katrina largely spared the group's French Quarter home, but, like much of the rest of New Orleans, it's been closed since the storm hit. The band may be missing some original members, but everyone involved can still channel the primordial urge to stomp.

**"THE PARK AVENUE WHIRL"**
59E59 Theatres, 59 E. 59th St. (212-279-4200)—A mutual love of the music of the nineteen-twenties and thirties unites the singer **Daryl Sherman** with **Vince Giordano** and his **Nighthawks Orchestra.** This revue, which also features the vocalist **Marion Cowings** and others, salutes the work of composers and performers of the era. Through Dec. 31.

**SWEET RHYTHM**
88 Seventh Ave. S., at Bleecker St. (212-255-3626)—This adventurous club continues its run of saxophone-and-drum encounters. Dec. 22 features **Abraham Burton** with **Eric McPherson** and **Nasheet Waits.** Dec. 29: **Marty Ehrlich** and **Allison Miller.**

**SYMPHONY SPACE**
Broadway at 95th St. (212-864-5400)—Dec. 20-21: "Bending Towards the Light . . . A Jazz Nativity." The trombonist **Slide Hampton,** the tap dancer **Jimmy Slyde,** the Latin-jazz flutist **Dave Valentin,** the singer **Dee Daniels,** and other performers offer this New York tradition.

**TONIC**
107 Norfolk St. (212-358-7503)—Dec. 21. **Okkyung Lee,** a classically trained avant-garde composer and cellist active on the downtown scene (she's a frequent collaborator of John Zorn and musicians on his Tzadik label), incorporates jazz, traditional Korean music, and noise into her atmospheric music. With degrees in film scoring and contemporary improvisation, Lee doesn't shy away from extremes; her music oscillates between fragility and violence, composition and improvisation. Appearing with her are **Sylvie Courvoisier,** on piano, **John Hollenbeck,** on drums and percussion, and **Anthony Burr,** on clarinet and bass clarinet.

**VILLAGE VANGUARD**
178 Seventh Ave. S., at 11th St. (212-255-4037)—Dec. 20-25: Few jazz musicians understand the byways of small-group dynamics quite as well as the pianist, composer, and arranger **Cedar Walton,** a paragon of swing since his days as a Jazz Messenger with Art Blakey in the early sixties. His quartet here includes the saxophonist **Vincent Herring.** Dec. 27-Jan. 1: **Dr. Michael White's Original Liberty Jazz Band of New Orleans.** The clarinettist and musicologist White celebrates the riches of jazz's first golden era. The **Vanguard Jazz Orchestra** holds sway on Mondays.

# ART
## MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

**METROPOLITAN MUSEUM**
Fifth Ave. at 82nd St. (212-535-7710)—**"Robert Rauschenberg: Combines"** opens Dec. 20. ♦ The small but notable exhibition **"Antonello da Messina: Sicily's Renaissance Master"** includes the masterly, enigmatic "Virgin Annunciate." Through March 5. ♦ The devotional paintings in **"Fra Angelico"** are lit up with heavenly blues, blood reds, and pure golds. Rewarding long contemplation, they can feel like love letters, passed down through the centuries from the fifteenth-century Tuscan artist. Through Jan. 29. ♦ In van Gogh's abrupt career—he was a full-time artist for just ten years—everything seems to have happened at once. The works in **"Vincent van Gogh: The Drawings"** indicate a talent that evolved so rapidly that one sometimes seems to be witnessing a shift in style or philosophy on a single sheet of paper. Despite this, nothing feels frantic; rather, there is an eerie calm, from his lonesome, grayed "Landscape in Drenthe" (1883) and the boulder-centric "Rock and Ruins" (1888) to the interiors he drew at the Saint-Rémy asylum months before his death. Through Dec. 31. ♦ **"Santiago Calatrava: Sculpture Into Architecture."** Through March 5. ♦ **"Clouet to Seurat: French Drawings from the British Museum."** Through Jan. 29. ♦ **"Prague: The Crown of Bohemia, 1347-1437."** Through Jan. 3. ♦ The pre-Photoshop images in **"The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult"** were purported to depict ghosts, spirit writing, ectoplasm, and the like. Through Dec. 31. ♦ **"David Milne Watercolors: 'Painting Toward the Light.'"** A subset of a larger show organized by the Art Gallery of Ontario, these forty-five watercolor depictions of New York State scenes provide a rare chance to see the work of the Canadian artist (1882-1953) outside his home country. Through Jan. 29. (Open Tuesdays through Sundays, 9:30 to 5:30, and Friday and Saturday evenings until 9.)

**MUSEUM OF MODERN ART**
11 W. 53rd St. (212-708-9400)—**"Beyond the Visible: The Art of Odilon Redon"** spans the French symbolist's work from nightmarish charcoal drawings to jewel-toned oils and pastels. Through Jan. 23. ♦ Elizabeth Murray's exploded canvases occupy an idiosyncratic zone somewhere between Cubism, Surrealism, and Looney Toons. This career retrospective tracks the painter's progress as she tried to reconcile with minimalism in the late sixties and early seventies, then ultimately rebelled against it. The titles to her relief paintings are like responses to some tortured inner dialogue: "More Than You Know," "Do the Dance," "Don't Be Cruel." By the early eighties, her works

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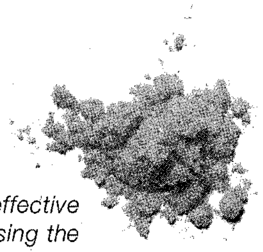

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were composed of multiple canvases that drifted apart like tectonic plates or unruly puzzle pieces. In recent paintings, she favors bright, child-friendly primary and secondary hues. Murray's slapstick aesthetic is an acquired taste but, like that of Carroll Dunham or Philip Guston, an essentially American and dissenting one. Through Jan. 9. ♦ The fever pitch of post-9/11 anxiety is simultaneously stoked and suppressed in **"SAFE: Design Takes on Risk,"** an exhibition of objects designed to ward off, stanch, or manage disaster. Through Jan. 2. ♦ **"Pixar."** The company that brought us "Toy Story" and "The Incredibles" is honored with an exhibition of paintings, sketches, sculptures, models, and digital installations, as well as a program of animated films. Through Feb. 6. (Open Wednesdays through Mondays, 10:30 to 5:30, and Friday evenings until 8.)

**GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM**
Fifth Ave. at 89th St. (212-423-3500)—The sprawling exhibition **"Russia!"** includes most everything you might think could fit under that rubric: gilt religious icons dating from the Middle Ages, Renaissance-era Western European paintings from imperial collections, romanticized portraits of peasant life, socialist-realist propaganda, early modernist masterworks from the collections of industrialists, videos made just this year. Through Jan. 11. (Open Saturdays through Wednesdays, 10 to 5:45, and Fridays, 10 to 8.)

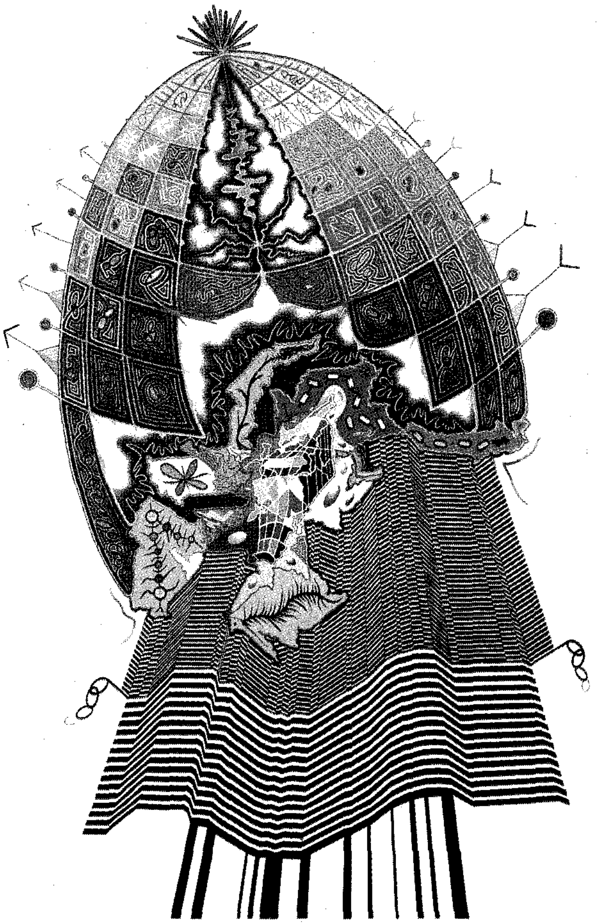
**WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART**
Madison Ave. at 75th St. (800-944-8639)—**"The Art of Richard Tuttle."** Through Feb. 5. ♦ **"Follow Through."** Museum snobs who habitually avoid headsets might be enticed to don them for this "mobile audio-visual project" (not a tour!) created by the artists Jennifer Crowe and Scott Paterson. Styled as a tongue-in-cheek aerobics workout, with instructions ranging from "Mimic your neighbor" to "Circle the room" followed by a post-viewing cooldown, the project tracks the Director's Tour of the fifth-floor permanent collection, with stops at Hopper, O'Keeffe, Dove, and Gottlieb. Some of the directions, like "Yawn and repeat languidly under your breath, 'Maybe there's something I'm missing,' " summon the antics of Janet Cardiff, but the work doesn't, unfortunately, achieve her poeticism or profundity. Through Jan. 29. ♦ Ed Ruscha's **"Course of Empire"**—which shares a name and theme with Thomas Cole's 1833-36 cycle of paintings, in the New-York Historical Society's permanent collection—was a hit at the Venice Biennale and is on view at the Whitney through Jan. 29. ♦ **"Raymond Pettibon."** Thirty-seven drawings and an animated film. Through Feb. 19. ♦ The retrospective **"Oscar Bluemner: A Passion for Color"** reveals a painter (1867-1938) who melded Old World influences with an architect's training and eye—updated later by the lessons of the Fauves, Die Brücke, and artists like Franz Marc—to produce images of buildings and landscapes broken into bright structural shards, like segments of stained glass. Through Feb. 12. ♦ **"Still Life: A Vital Theme."** Through Jan. 15. (Open Wednesdays, Thursdays, and weekends, 11 to 6, and Fridays, 1 to 9.)

**AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY**
Central Park W. at 79th St. (212-769-5100)—**"Darwin"** traces the discoveries and influence of the great naturalist (1809-82) with, among other things, a re-creation of his study, samples of fossils he collected, and live specimens of the types of tortoises, frogs, and iguanas that he encountered in his travels to the Galápagos Islands. Through May 29. ♦ **"Dinosaurs: Ancient Fossils, New Discoveries,"** a review of recent developments in the study of dinosaurs, provides insight into how the animals moved through their world. Through Jan. 8. ♦ **"The Butterfly Conservatory: Tropical Butterflies Alive in Winter"** is back for an eighth year. Through May 29. (Open daily, 10 to 5:45.)

**AMERICAN FOLK ART MUSEUM**
45 W. 53rd St. (212-265-1040)—An international quintet of self-taught artists have work on view in **"Obsessive Drawing."** Through March 19. (Open Tuesdays through Thursdays, and weekends, 10:30 to 5:30, and Fridays, 10:30 to 7:30.)

**DRAWING CENTER**
35 Wooster St. (212-219-2166)—**"Persistent Vestiges: Drawing from the American-Vietnam War."** Through Feb. 11. (Open Tuesdays through Fridays, 10 to 6, and Saturdays, 11 to 6.)

**FRICK COLLECTION**
1 E. 70th St. (212-288-0700)—Some one hundred paintings by the Netherlandish artist Hans Memling (ca. 1435-94) survive; of the thirty portraits, twenty are at the Frick for the exhibition **"Memling's Portraits."** Through Dec. 31. (Open Tuesdays through Saturdays, 10 to 6, and Sundays, 11 to 5. For the duration of the Memling show, the special-exhibition galleries will stay open until 8 on Fridays.)



*John J. O'Connor's "Mexada," at Pierogi, in Brooklyn.*

**NATIONAL ACADEMY MUSEUM**
Fifth Ave. at 89th St. (212-369-4880)—**"Marks of Distinction: Two Hundred Years of American Drawings and Watercolors from the Hood Museum of Art."** Through Dec. 31. (Open Wednesdays and Thursdays, noon to 5, and Fridays through Sundays, 11 to 6.)

**NEUE GALERIE**
1048 Fifth Ave., at 86th St. (212-628-6200)—**"Egon Schiele,"** an exhibition of more than a hundred and fifty paintings and drawings by the Austrian artist, who died in 1918, at the age of twenty-eight. Through Feb. 20. (Open Saturdays through Mondays, and Thursdays, 11 to 6, and Fridays, 11 to 9.)

**NEW MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART**
Temporarily located in the Chelsea Art Museum, 556 W. 22nd St. (212-219-1222)—You may have to be a digital-media geek to appreciate the endeavors presented in **"Fresh Projects: Shimmer."** On view are two design-sculpture hybrids, one an undulating, funguslike structure made of brown cardboard (embedded with speakers) by Beth Coleman and Howard Goldkrand, the other a weave of white plastic ribbons by Alisa Andrasek, which hangs from the ceiling over a field of what looks and feels like white Astro-Turf. Each is accompanied by a pair of flat-screen monitors projecting complex technical models of the codes used to devise the simple objects' forms. Through Dec. 31. ♦ Brian Jungen's sculptures use Nike sneakers, plastic chairs, and cafeteria trays to represent Pacific Northwest tribal masks, whale skeletons, and prisoners in the Canadian penal system; it may sound like Surrealistic busywork, but Jungen manages the transpositions with satirical grace. Through Dec. 31. (Open Tuesdays through Saturdays, noon to 6, and Thursday evenings until 8.)

## GALLERIES—UPTOWN

*Galleries are usually open Tuesdays through Saturdays, from around 10 or 11 to between 5 and 6; please call the gallery for exact hours.*

**YVES KLEIN**
The Frenchman best known for monochrome paintings in his signature ultramarine blue—as well as the doctored photograph "The Leap Into the Void"—also liked to play with fire. The "Fire Paintings," from 1961-62, were executed with a blowtorch on cardboard, with occasional flourishes of pigment and resin. Murky fields of deep ochre and umber are peppered with arcs and blotches, jagged blurs and smears. One looks like an arching body (in the vein of his "Anthropometries," in which women pressed their paint-slathered bodies against paper); another a field of delicate, fiery flowers or stars. Mostly, the works are in keeping with mid-century abstractionists like Fontana and Burri, who slashed, punctured, and burned their way to the end of painting's tether. Through Jan. 14. (Michael Werner, 4 E. 77th St. 212-988-1623.)

### *Short List*

**CHARLES BURCHFIELD:** DC Moore, 724 Fifth Ave. 212-247-2111. Through Dec. 23. **SAUL LEITER:** Greenberg, 41 E. 57th St. 212-334-0010. Through Jan. 21. **SOPHIE MATISSE:** Naumann, 22 E. 80th St. 212-472-6800. Through Dec. 30. **RICHARD POUSETTE-DART:** Knoedler, 19 E. 70th St. 212-794-0550. Through Jan. 7. **GERHARD RICHTER:** Marian Goodman, 24 W. 57th St. 212-977-7160. Through Jan. 14. **CY TWOMBLY:** Gagosian, 980 Madison Ave., at 76th St. 212-744-2313. Through Dec. 24. **"TIFFANY/POLLOCK" / BEREND STRIK:** Jack Tilton, 8 E. 76th St. 212-737-2221. Through Dec. 23.

## GALLERIES—CHELSEA

**POLLY APFELBAUM**
Apfelbaum's signature dyed fabric scraps arranged like pools of color on the floor riff on everything from Pollock's horizontally composed paintings to minimalist floor sculpture to ornate decorative rugs. Here, however, she limits her palette to black-and-white and appropriates the zany, curly-lined drawing style of cartoons. Bones, eyes, and a long "garden" of flat white flowers are drawn in simple black outlines. Problem is, color is Apfelbaum's forte, and it's missing in these anemic works. Plus, the concept of cartoons on the floor doesn't carry much weight compared to deftly and simultaneously nodding to Carl Andre and Persian carpets. Through Dec. 23. (D'Amelio Terras, 525 W. 22nd St. 212-352-9460.)

**TAMY BEN-TOR**
The Israeli artist Ben-Tor's video "Women Talk About Adolph Hitler" was a sleeper at P.S. 1's "Greater New York." A hilarious string of performances that ultimately diminish Hitler's stature—and send up serious Holocaust documentaries—is joined here by "Girls Beware," a grotesque parody of Jewish hysteria over Arab threats, as well as a series of "video portraits" showcasing biddies ranting about everything from politics to cell-phone service. Cindy Sherman is often invoked as a reference, due to the proliferation of wigs and sunglasses, but Ben-Tor is more Meryl Streep: a chameleon and master of accents, with acting chops to boot. On Fridays and Saturdays at 4, she goes live with a pitch-perfect three-role performance entitled "Exotica, the Rat, and the Liberal." Through Jan. 14. (Feuer, 530 W. 24th St. 212-989-7700.)

**JENNY DUBNAU / PORTIA MUNSON**
Just this side of Photo-Realism, Dubnau's oil self-portraits are nuanced without being precious, and she shows an admirable willingness to laugh at herself—here she sports a Groucho nose-and-glasses, there a "Wizard of Oz" witch hat with green goop on her face. Ultimately, though, if humorously unsparing self-revelation is the project, one wishes for more information than a tinsel wig or a pencilled mustache can provide. A similar sense that first-rate technique doesn't quite cover a thin idea appears in Munson's mandala-like flatbed-scanner prints of flowers from her garden. They're beautifully made, and obviously hard to do, but in the end, not more than the sum of their pretty parts. Through Dec. 23. (P.P.O.W., 555 W. 25th St. 212-647-1044.)

**JOACHIM KOESTER**
Documentary reverie is Koester's primary mode, and once his arcane narratives have captured your attention you keep looking for longer than you'd planned. Here, three subtly interlocking stories unfold. In "Morning of the Magicians," an abandoned Sicilian villa—photographs show it buried in bushes, its erotic frescoes flaking—turns out to have been the haunt, in 1920, of Aleister Crowley and his devotees. "The Kant Walks" tracks another visionary's private foibles, with views of a shabbily industrial European city that is revealed as modern Kaliningrad, once Königsberg, where the philosopher prowled, cogitating on a-priori truth and suffering from insomnia. Last, there is "Message from Andrée," a hypnotic film of black-and-white stains, scratches, and starbursts; the mysteriously exposed negatives are the remains of a doomed 1897 expedition to the North Pole. Through Dec. 23. (Greene Naftali, 526 W. 26th St. 212-463-7770.)

**TIM LEHMACHER**
This Berlin-based photographer shows images of European figurative public sculpture seen from the rear, so that the subjects—including royalty, soldiers, statesmen, nymphs, and a few nudes—are anonymous. Their stances, thrown into high relief by the digital removal of any distracting background, tell us all we need to know about each subject's status and power. But whether they were intended to command, exhort, or charm the viewer, these figures all seem oddly vulnerable and faintly foolish from the back. In Lehmacher's cool, elegant work, history faces a void while irrelevance closes in from behind. Through Dec. 23. (Cooney, 511 W. 25th St. 212-255-8158.)

**LARI PITTMAN**
Pittman spent the early part of his career sorting through the ramifications of sixties Pop. Now he's put traditional cultures in a blender and splattered them across the surface of canvases that look like fever dreams of ethnographically inspired interior design. The tribal and the so-called exotic figure largely in his lexicon, but there are still hints of his earlier interest in graphic forms, like car decals, in the whirling compositions. With their earthen hues and patterns inspired by American Indian, Asian, and Greek art, these darker, more knowing paintings depart from the hip, bright banality Pittman once strove for—and which one usually associates with anything deemed even marginally Pop. Through Dec. 23. (Gladstone, 515 W. 24th St. 212-206-9300.)

**MICHAEL RIEDEL**
One of the best ways to achieve some recognition is to piggyback one's work onto that of an acclaimed artist—a tradition that dates back at least as far as Rauschenberg's "Erased de Kooning" (1953) drawing. Riedel does it here with a series of black-and-white photographs, printed as wallpaper and attached to giant panels, which revisit a recent exhibition of paintings by Neo Rauch mounted in the same space. However, Riedel's version of the show, cleverly titled "Neo," is full of oblique views and picture panels rearranged like puzzle pieces, so that Rauch's paintings are reconfigured rather than merely reproduced. As a conceptual strategy, re-presentation is rather worn, but Riedel's redux is still a nice trick. Through Dec. 23. (Zwirner, 525 W. 19th St. 212-727-2070.)

**W. EUGENE SMITH**
Smith's reputation as one of *Life* magazine's most intelligent and intrepid photojournalists is so solid that a greatest-hits survey of the sort mounted here would seem superfluous. But in a period that has seen the photo-essay all but disappear, Smith's ability to tell a compelling story in a few dramatically composed frames is inspiring. The show includes excerpts from some of his most famous *Life* narratives, many from the fifties, when human-interest stories still had substance, as well as free-lance essays on Pittsburgh's steel mills, Haitian mental hospitals, and the results of mercury pollution in Japan. Extraordinary vintage prints (from the collection of Henry Luce's grandson Christopher) make already superb work even more powerful. Through Dec. 23. (Mann, 210 Eleventh Ave. 212-989-7600.)

**DAVID THORPE**
Young artists are proving themselves devotees of the fin de siècle—late nineteenth, that is, rather than twentieth century. Thorpe's sympathies lie with the Arts and Crafts movement of his native England and the spiritual-uplift-through-art stance of everyone from Ruskin to William Morris. Solidly crafted Formica screens cut across the gallery and mimic stained-glass windows; prismatic paintings conjure William Blake as well as prog-rock album covers. The work is uncommonly handsome in its geometric symmetry and moody late-Victorian coloring. There's something unsettling, however, about adopting visionary-utopian aesthetics without the attendant philosophy; it's a stance that favors packaging over substance. Through Dec. 22. (303 Gallery, 525 W. 22nd St. 212-255-1121.)

### *Short List*

**MARCO BREUER:** Von Lintel, 555 W. 25th St. 212-242-0599. Through Jan 7. **APRIL GORNIK:** Danese, 535 W. 24th St. 212-223-2227. Through Dec. 23. **HANS HAACKE:** Cooper, 534 W. 21st St. 212-255-1105. Through Dec. 23. **GWEN HARDIE:** Dinter, 547 W. 27th St. 212-947-2818. Through Dec. 23. **TIM NOBLE AND SUE WEBSTER:** Bortolami Dayan, 510 W. 25th St. 212-727-2050. Through Dec. 23. **CATHERINE SULLIVAN:** Metro Pictures, 519 W. 24th St. 212-206-7100. Through Dec. 23. **BILL VIOLA:** James Cohan, 533 W. 26th St. 212-714-9500. Through Dec. 22. **REBECCA WARREN:** Marks, 523 W. 24th St. 212-243-0200. Through Dec. 23. **"NUDES IN VOGUE":** Mitchell-Innes & Nash, 534 W. 26th St. 212-744-7400. Through Dec. 23.

## GALLERIES—DOWNTOWN

**DEREK WALCOTT**
The Nobel laureate Walcott's paintings don't reach the heights of his poetry, but they convincingly evoke the bright colors of his native St. Lucia, a sun-saturated Windward island in the Caribbean. Quiet seascapes and street scenes in Gros Îlet are drawn in bold green and yellow and soothing peach and tan. Shadows cast by slim trees mingle with houses painted in electric hues. Above all, Walcott has an eye for atmosphere. A painting of the waterfront in Saint-Malo, France, features an overcast sky that contrasts sharply with his Caribbean vignettes. The complicated relations between Europe and the West Indies dealt with in his poetry are mostly absent; the paintings seem more refuge than alternate aesthetic or ideological battleground. Through Dec. 30. (June Kelly, 591 Broadway. 212-226-1660.)

### *Short List*

**MALACHI FARRELL:** Thrust, 114 Bowery. 212-431-4802. Through Dec. 22. **NATE LOWMAN:** Maccarone, 45 Canal St. 212-431-4977. Through Jan. 8. **THERESE MITCHELL:** 84 Mercer Gallery, 212-966-6691; by appointment only. Through Jan. 7. **RICHARD TUTTLE:** Peter Freeman, 560 Broadway. 212-966-5154. Through Jan. 28.

## GALLERIES—BROOKLYN

**JOHN J. O'CONNOR / JOSHUA DORMAN**
It's probably safe to declare that when history lists the art tropes of this decade, near the top will appear systems analysis and its subcategories topography and cartography. O'Connor and Dorman both exemplify the trend, albeit in very different ways. O'Connor's huge works on paper are Pop-inflected, jagged, splat-shaped hybrids that attempt to map, via an arcane method of textual-to-numeric-to-visual translation, borrowings from Dante and the Atkins diet and everything in between. Dorman, meanwhile, paints on antique maps themselves, constructing fantasy lands and visual puns with the wonky, romantic intensity of a daydreaming ten-year-old. Through Dec. 23. (Pierogi, 177 N. 9th St. 718-599-2144.)

## DANCE

**NEW YORK CITY BALLET**
The final performances of Balanchine's version of "The Nutcracker," which captures the poignancy of the moment at which a girl is about to leave her childhood behind. (Dec. 20 at 6, Dec. 21 at 2 and 6, Dec. 22 at 6, Dec. 23 at 2 and 8, Dec. 26-28 at 2 and 6, Dec. 29 at 6, and Dec. 30 at 2 and 8.) ♦ The company begins its winter repertory season with a program echoing its first performance, at City Center in 1948, which included Balanchine's "Concerto Barocco" and "Symphony in C." These two essential works, the first restrained, the second expansive, perfectly embody the structure and character of the music, leaving aside all story. In "Concerto Barocco," set to Bach's Double Violin Concerto, each female soloist's part comments on one violin line, often in slight syncopation, while the corps illustrates the orchestral base. "Symphony in C," set to Bizet's Symphony No. 1, which he composed at seventeen, is a large, bright work in which Balanchine tapped the opulence of the Paris Opera Ballet, for which the piece was originally created. Out of this same formalist tradition, but in a drier vein, comes Peter Martins's "Fearful Symmetries," which rounds off the evening. With a minimalist, pop-inflected score by John Adams, it drives inexorably to its breathless resolution. (New York State Theatre, Lincoln Center. 212-870-5570. Jan. 3 at 7:30. Through Feb. 26.)

**ALVIN AILEY AMERICAN DANCE THEATRE**
Thriving and flush, the venerable company finishes out its five-week season at City Center. Programs rotate through Ailey classics and this year's premières, the best of which are "Ife/My Heart," by Ronald K. Brown, and "Acceptance in Surrender," by the company dancers Hope Boykin, Abdur-Rahim Jackson, and Matthew Rushing. (131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212. Dec. 21 at 2 and 8, Dec. 22-23 at 8, Dec. 24 at 2 and 8, Dec. 25 at 7:30, Dec. 27 at 7, Dec. 28 at 2 and 8, Dec. 29-30 at 8, Dec. 31 at 7:30, and Jan. 1 at 3 and 7:30.)

**GOLDEN DRAGON ACROBATS**
The troupe from Henan, China, concludes its run. (New Victory Theatre, 209 W. 42nd St. 212-239-6200. Dec. 20 at 7, Dec. 21 at 2 and 7, Dec. 22 at 7, Dec. 23 at 2 and 7, Dec. 24 at noon and 5, Dec. 27 at 7, Dec. 28 at 2 and 7, Dec. 29 at 7, Dec. 30 at 2 and 7, Dec. 31 at noon and 5, and Jan. 1 at 3.)

**CADEN MANSON/BIG ART GROUP**
Backed by a wide green screen and a few large video screens, the live actors of "House of No More" (seen last year at P.S. 122) play to downstage closed-circuit cameras; their images are beamed live onto a flickering transom of pre-filmed images. Manson's technique furnishes more provocations than the frantic story, a low-grade pulp thriller that's all chases, shrieks, and arguments. (Dance Theatre Workshop, 219 W. 19th St. 212-924-0077. Dec. 20-22 at 7:30.)

**SAVION GLOVER**
In what has become an annual holiday event, the tap-dance virtuoso comes to the Joyce, this time for a four-week run. The first year, he sang; the second, he went classical; this year, it's gospel music. The new concept, "Visions of a Bible," pairs him with the soulful singer Laurie Ann Hunter. Glover's band, The Otherz, comes on only for the last song. (175 Eighth Ave. 212-242-0800. Dec. 20 at 8, Dec. 21 at 2 and 8, Dec. 22-23 at 8, Dec. 24 at 2 and 8, Dec. 26-27 at 8, Dec. 28 at 2 and 8, Dec. 29 at 8, Dec. 30 at 2 and 8, Dec. 31 at 5, and Jan. 3 at 8. Through Jan. 15.)

## CLASSICAL MUSIC
## OPERA

**METROPOLITAN OPERA**
Dec. 21 at 7:30, Dec. 24 at 1:30, and Dec. 28 at 8: In **"An American Tragedy,"** the resourceful composer Tobias Picker and his librettist, Gene Scheer, have crafted a sturdy frame for Theodore Dreiser's earnest and overbearing novel about American money and morals. The opera boasts potent choruses, intricately wrought ensemble scenes, and florid arias—but not the transformative power that turns good source material into great art. The performances of Patricia Racette, Susan Graham, and Nathan Gunn are vocally alluring and dramatically assured; Dolora Zajick chews the scenery in an Azucena-like mother role, but the intensity of her voice is undeniable. James Conlon conducts. (These are the final performances.) ♦ Dec. 22 and Dec. 26 at 7:30, Dec. 29 at 8, and Dec. 31 at 7: This year's holiday show is **"Die Fledermaus,"** that delectable dollop of Viennese schlag, offered in Otto Schenk's period-piece production. The wild card in the deck will be provided by the actor Bill Irwin, taking the comic speaking role of the jailer Frosch. Also with Sondra Radvanovsky, Marina Domashenko, and Bo Skovhus; Jacques Lacombe. The New Year's Eve gala performance, as always, will feature several surprise guest stars during the Act II party scene. ♦ Dec. 23 at 8: The soprano Elizabeth Futral shone in the autumn performances of **"Lucia di Lammermoor"**; now the production returns, with the estimable Ramón Vargas singing Edgardo to her Lucia. Also with Charles Taylor and John Relyea; Edoardo Müller. ♦ Dec. 30 at 8: With Youngok Shin, Giuseppe Filianoti, and Hao Jiang Tian replacing Futral, Vargas, and Relyea. ♦ Dec. 27 and Jan. 3 at 8 and Dec. 31 at 1:30: **"Wozzeck,"** Alban Berg's compact and unforgettable portrait of an ordinary soldier doomed by circumstance, returns in the stark Mark Lamos production, with Katarina Dalayman, Clifton Forbis, Graham Clark, Alan Held (in the title role), and Walter Fink; James Levine, an unmatched conductor of Expressionist opera, is in the pit. ♦ Jan. 2 at 8: The season première of **"L'Elisir d'Amore,"** with a reliable cast that includes Ruth Ann Swenson, Ramón Vargas, Peter Coleman-Wright, and Andrew Shore (in his début); Maurizio Barbacini. (Metropolitan Opera House. 212-362-6000.)

**AMATO OPERA**
Anthony Amato's shoestring company, housed in a tiny old-time theatre on the Lower East Side, celebrates the holidays with its production of Lehár's **"The Merry Widow"**—sung in English, just as the composer would have wanted. (Amato Opera Theatre, 319 Bowery, at 2nd St. 212-228-8200. Dec. 23-24 at 7:30 and Dec. 31 at 7.)

## HOLIDAY MUSIC

**"MESSIAH"**
The last big outing this season for Handel's beloved "entertainment" on Christian themes comes courtesy of the Masterwork Chorus, one of those good and hardy groups that have been tackling the piece for decades. Andrew Megill conducts; the excellent vocal quartet includes the renowned early-music soprano Julianne Baird and the velvet-voiced mezzo-soprano Margaret Lattimore. (Carnegie Hall. 212-247-7800. Dec. 22-23 at 8.)

**ST. THOMAS CHURCH CHOIR**
The Choir of St. Thomas Church, the finest Anglican ensemble in the country, follows its own "Messiah" series with a performance of Britten's magical "Ceremony of Carols," accompanied by the harpist Barbara Allen, in its magnificent neo-Gothic space; immediately afterward comes a performance (by John Scott, the choir's music director) of Messiaen's organ work "La Nativité du Seigneur." (Fifth Ave. at 53rd St. Dec. 21 at 5:30. No tickets required.)

**NEW YORK STRING ORCHESTRA**
Carnegie Hall's proud annual tradition, a convocation of young virtuosos under the leadership of the violinist and conductor Jaime Laredo. Dec. 24 at 7: An all-Mozart evening on Christmas Eve includes the "Marriage of Figaro" Overture, the Piano Concerto No. 21 in C Major (with Jonathan Biss), and the "Posthorn" Serenade. ♦ Dec. 28 at 8: Hilary Hahn joins the ensemble for a concert of favorite works by Bach (the Concerto for Two Violins in D Minor), Barber (the "Adagio"), and Beethoven (the Seventh Symphony), along with a rarity by the early Romantic composer Louis Spohr (the Violin Concerto No. 8, "In the Style of an Opera Scene"). (212-247-7800.)

**BARGEMUSIC**
The doughty floating chamber-music series has some traditions of its own, centering on Bach. Dec. 24 at 7:30: Steven Beck, one of the city's most admired young pianists, offers the Goldberg Variations on the barge's Steinway grand. ♦ Dec. 31 at 7:30: The violinist Mark Peskanov leads a band of barge regulars (including the brothers Colin and Eric Jacobsen, on violin and cello, and the flutist Michael Parloff) in a concert featuring the Brandenburg Concertos Nos. 2, 4, and 5 and the Violin Concerto in A Minor. (Fulton Ferry Landing, Brooklyn. 718-624-2083.)

**BACH VESPERS**
Those seeking a musical enrichment to their Christmas Day can head to Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, where the Bach Choir (and a period-instrument band) will perform Parts I and III of the composer's Christmas Oratorio—just as they've been doing for thirty-eight years. (Central Park W. at 65th St. Dec. 25 at 5. A donation is suggested.)

**"P.D.Q. BACH: A FORTY-YEAR RETROGRESSIVE"**
Peter Schickele, back to his old tricks, takes a contemplative look back at the œuvre of his alter ego, Bach's alleged twenty-second son—featuring such classics as the "Liebeslieder Polkas" and the String Quartet in F Major, "The Moose"—assisted by the (legitimate) Canticum Novum Singers and four string players temporarily calling themselves the Armadillo Quartet. (Symphony Space, Broadway at 95th St. 212-864-5400. Dec. 27-29 at 8.)

**MIDTOWN CONCERTS**
The Church of St. Francis of Assisi, a locus for early music in Manhattan, presents two holiday concerts. Dec. 28 at 1:15: My Lord Chamberlain's Consort (featuring the countertenor and "early harp" player Drew Minter) performs Christmas music from sixteenth-century England. ♦ Dec. 31 at 7:30: An expanded version of Artek, the church's resident ensemble (under the enterprising direction of Gwendolyn Toth), offers "First Night at St. Francis," a program in which a generous portion of Handel's "Messiah" (with the St. Francis Choir) will be offered along with Corelli's "Christmas" Concerto and excerpts from Part II of Bach's Christmas Oratorio. (135 W. 31st St. No tickets required.)

**NEW YORK PHILHARMONIC**
The charismatic soprano Angela Gheorghiu, making her Philharmonic début, is the special guest for the New Year's Eve concert, in which Lorin Maazel will conduct operatic selections by Catalani ("Ebben? Ne andrò lontana," from "La Wally"),

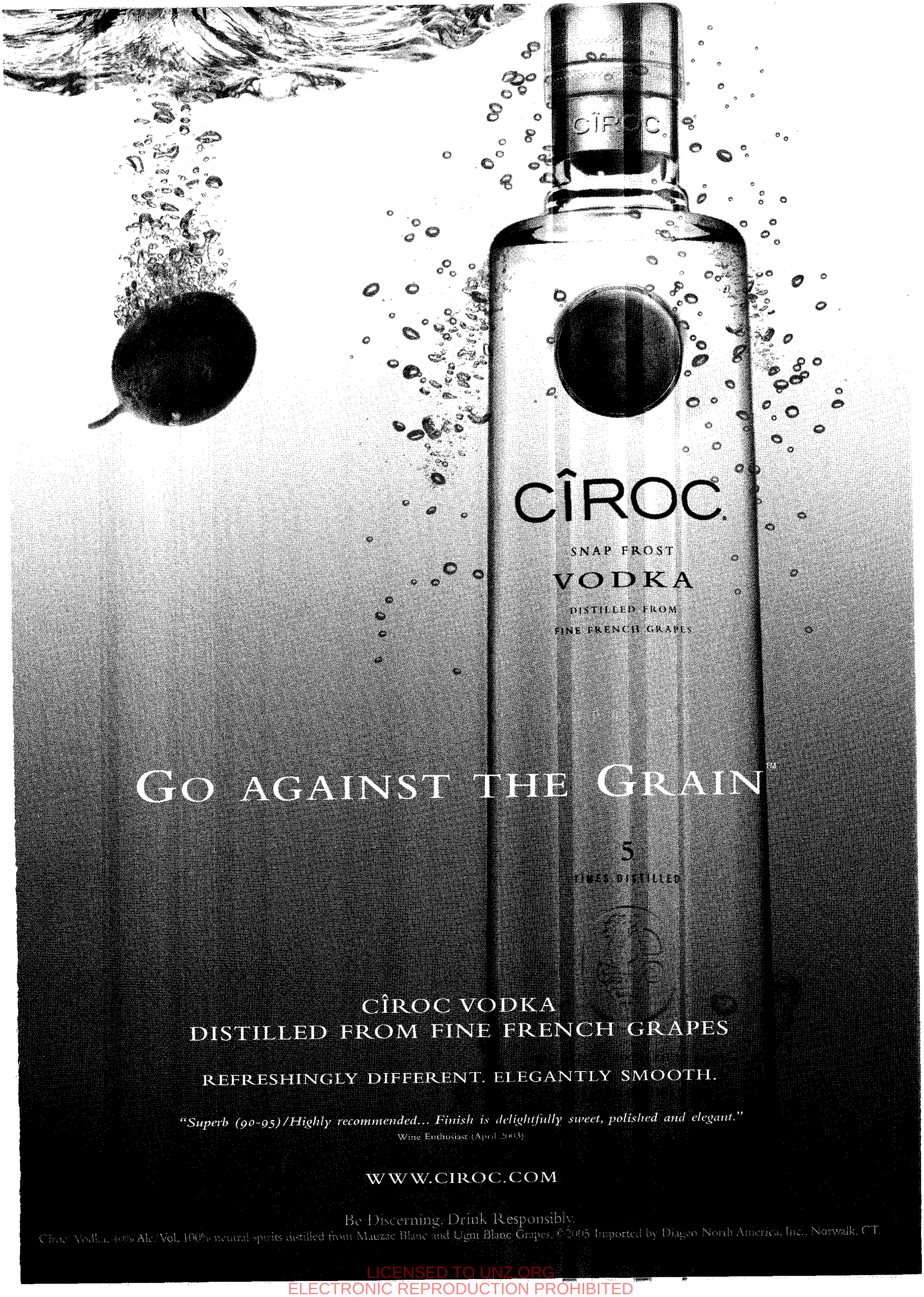
## TABLES FOR TWO
## SPIGOLO

1561 Second Ave., at 81st St. (212-744-1100)—Spigolo is the kind of Italian place you might want to make your regular neighborhood spot—say, on a lazy Sunday evening, when you want something low-key, don't want to cook, and are sick of takeout. But just try getting in! The place has only nine tables and a bar that can accommodate a mere handful of people, and it's *molto popolare*. (*Spigolo*, by the way, means "corner" or "edge" in Italian, as in the edge of a table.) More and more in New York, it seems, reservations can be had only at the early-bird-special hours or the wee small hours, unless you happened to have had the foresight to book an eight o'clock table for 2005 back in the Eisenhower years.

The aesthetics of the place are not its strong suit—it's generically homey, with exposed-brick walls and tediously genial framed prints. Scott and Heather Fratangelo, the young couple who opened Spigolo last February, live upstairs; he is the executive chef, and she is the hostess and pastry chef. (They met while both were working at the Union Square Café.) The food does not lack for color, though. A table of four expressed deep satisfaction with three shared starters: a heaping bowl of Prince Edward Island mussels in a garlicky saffron broth with smoked tomatoes; a generous tangle of braised octopus with tomato and chiles; and a lighthearted, vibrant marinated-beet salad with Gorgonzola crostini and mâche. But a salmon tartare with capers, parsley, sun-dried tomatoes, and cucumber, which sounded so refreshing, was almost unbearably salty.

Much of the meal suffered from the same problem, with the notable exceptions of sheep's-milk gnocchi, white, weightless clouds served with radicchio and pancetta, and *garganelli* pasta with a hearty, but not heavy, sweet fennel-sausage ragù. Of the second courses, the lamb stew made Friuli-style, with Swiss chard, Brussels sprouts, and polenta, seemed sure to be a ticket to the northern-Italian countryside and to mentally take us away from all this. It was not, and did not, nor did the good but unremarkable grilled strip steak. The restaurant's special dessert is caramel *affogato* with *bomboloni*—coffee poured over gelato with a bunch of little doughnut holes. It is worth getting, just so you can say the word *bomboloni* out loud. (Open daily for dinner. Entrées $22-$29.)

—*Nancy Franklin*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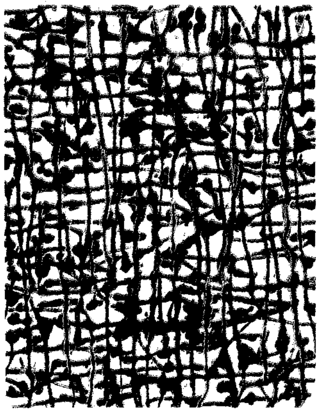
## CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK
## MARKED UP

Marco Breuer's primary medium is photography, but you would never know it from looking at his new show at Von Lintel. Although most of the thirty-six small pieces here were made using two of the earliest nineteenth-century photographic printing processes—gum bichromate and cyanotype—none of the work involves a camera, a lens, film, or a recognizable image. With their pitted surfaces, full of holes and flecked with color, Breuer's abstractions look like moth-eaten camouflage or aerial views of some forbidden planet. Like Vik Muniz and Adam Fuss, Breuer tests the limits of the medium, always experimenting, never repeating himself. In the past, he has exploited the unpredictable results of putting mold, jello, beer, hot coals, and even blood on photographic paper. "Abraded" is how he describes the condition of his best new works, but it's an understatement. Repeatedly sanded, gouged, and folded, these pieces have endured a level of creative violence that makes their splendid final state all the more ravishing.


MARCO BREUER

—*Vince Aletti*

Mascagni, and Puccini (from "Madama Butterfly" and "La Rondine"). (Avery Fisher Hall. 212-875-5656. Dec. 31 at 8.)

## OTHER CONCERTS

**NEW YORK PHILHARMONIC**
Subscription concerts carry on through the holiday season at Avery Fisher Hall. The next, conducted by Lorin Maazel, begins with an amuse-bouche—Weber's charming Bassoon Concerto, with the Philharmonic's principal player, Judith LeClair—before moving on to heavier fare by Tchaikovsky (the Violin Concerto, with Julia Fischer) and Sibelius (the Fifth Symphony). (212-875-5656. Dec. 28-29 and Jan. 3 at 7:30 and Dec. 30 at 8.)

**NEW YORK CONTINUO COLLECTIVE**
The group, a collection of singers and players devoted to the performance of the music of seventeenth-century Italy, offers works by four composers (including Sigismondo D'India and Giaches de Wert), all settings from Torquato Tasso's epic poem "Gerusalemme Liberata." (Church of St. Francis of Assisi, 135 W. 31st St. Dec. 21 at 1:15. No tickets required.)

**COMPOSERS GUILD OF NEW JERSEY**
In what has been described as an "alternative holiday concert," a group of noted performers (including the cellist Fred Sherry and William Anderson, a guitarist with the new-music group Cygnus) offer a selection of classic and contemporary music that includes works by Holst, Bach, John Eaton, and Steve Reich ("Electric Counterpoint," performed by a squad of fifteen guitarists). (Weill Recital Hall, Carnegie Hall. 212-247-7800. Dec. 22 at 8.)

## MOVIES
## OPENING

**CACHÉ (HIDDEN)**
Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. In French. Opening Dec. 23. (Lincoln Plaza Cinemas and Sunshine Cinema.)

**CASANOVA**
The story of the eighteenth-century amorous adventurer, directed by Lasse Hallström and starring Heath Ledger and Sienna Miller. Opening Dec. 25. (In wide release.)

**CHEAPER BY THE DOZEN 2**
Adam Shankman directed this comedy sequel, starring Steve Martin and Bonnie Hunt as parents who take their twelve kids on a summer vacation. Opening Dec. 21. (In wide release.)

**FUN WITH DICK AND JANE**
Jim Carrey and Téa Leoni star in this remake of the 1977 comedy as a prosperous couple who must live by their wits after their company is involved in a financial scandal. Directed by Dean Parisot. Opening Dec. 21. (In wide release.)

**THE INTRUDER**
Claire Denis directed this drama about a man (Michel Subor) who receives a black-market heart transplant. In French. Opening Dec. 23 (Cinema Village.)

**THE MATADOR**
Pierce Brosnan stars in this comic thriller, written and directed by Richard Shepard, about a hit man who crosses paths with a travelling salesman (Greg Kinnear) in a Mexico City bar. With Hope Davis, Philip Baker Hall, and Dylan Baker. Opening Dec. 30. (In wide release.)

**MATCH POINT**
This moral tale about adultery and murder, set in London and starring Scarlett Johansson, Jonathan Rhys-Meyers, Emily Mortimer, and Brian Cox, was written and directed by Woody Allen. Opening Dec. 28. (In wide release.)

**MUNICH**
Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. Opening Dec. 23. (In wide release.)

**MY NAME WAS SABINA SPIELREIN**
A documentary by Elisabeth Márton about Spielrein, who fell in love with Carl Jung, was psychoanalyzed by Sigmund Freud, and became one of the first female psychoanalysts. Opening Dec. 28. (Film Forum.)

**THE NEW WORLD**
Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. Opening Dec. 25. (Lincoln Square.)

**THE RINGER**
Barry Blaustein directed this comedy starring Johnny Knoxville and Brian Cox, about two men who plan to rig the Special Olympics. The Farrelly brothers were executive producers. Opening Dec. 23. (In wide release.)

**RUMOR HAS IT . . .**
A romantic comedy with Jennifer Aniston, Mark Ruffalo, Shirley MacLaine, and Kevin Costner. Directed by Rob Reiner. Written by Ted Griffin. Opening Dec. 25. (In wide release.)

**THE WHITE COUNTESS**
A former U.S. diplomat (Ralph Fiennes) falls in love with a Russian countess (Natasha Richardson) who works at a Shanghai dance club in the nineteen-thirties. Written by Kazuo Ishiguro and directed by James Ivory. Opening Dec. 21. (Paris.)

## NOW PLAYING

**AGATHA ET LES LECTURES ILLIMITÉES**
For more than a decade, Marguerite Duras wrote few books and made many films instead. This film, one of her last, from 1981, is storytelling in its purest form: Duras, approaching seventy, and her lover, Yann Andréa, almost thirty, recite on the soundtrack the dialogue of a brother and sister who, now adults and parents, meet in a desolate seaside hotel in winter to recall their one night of incestuous love. The inadmissible ecstasy of their burning memories is matched by Duras's images of the fogged-up windows of the empty hotel, the vacant dawn streets, the cold winter light of the wind-lashed ocean, and a woman curled up on a sofa, waiting for a deliverance that will never come. Bulle Ogier, grand actress of the French cinema, passes mutely through the hotel salon and moves slowly, balletically, as if pushing through the viscous medium of time itself. The precise, tremulous diction of Duras and Andréa is recorded in hyperrealistic proximity, turning consonants into caresses and vowels into cries, as in the brother's tribute to the power of forbidden love: "The indecency of her body has the magnificence of God." Duras has created a moviegoing experience that is outside the norm, and a life experience that is simply exceptional. In French.—*Richard Brody* (Florence Gould Hall; Jan. 3.)

**BROKEBACK MOUNTAIN**
In the summer of 1963, Ennis Del Mar (Heath Ledger) and Jack Twist (Jake Gyllenhaal) herd the sheep on Brokeback Mountain, in Wyoming, and fall in love. Ang Lee's movie traces the ups and downs of that love over many years, making it clear that the downs are fated to outnumber the ups. The film has a curious motion to begin with, managing to seem at once hectic and sluggish; once the heroes start to grow up, however, and thus to struggle against their feelings, the story comes painfully alive, and the performances stretch toward the tragic. There is fine support from Anne Hathaway and Michelle Williams as the baffled wives of the two men and from Kate Mara as Ennis's teen-age daughter, but the picture belongs to Ledger, whose downcast gaze and chewed-up words bear almost unbearable testimony to a heart under siege. Any attempt to promote this as an issue movie, gripped by an agenda, feels badly misplaced; the only issue here is the oldest and most sorrowful one of all.—*Anthony Lane* (Reviewed in our issue of 12/12/05.) (In wide release.)

**CAPOTE**
How could Truman Capote, with his high, thin, goose-quill voice and his floating palms, possibly have gained the trust of the straightforward men and women of Holcomb, Kansas, when he went there for this magazine in 1959 to investigate the pointless slaughter of four members of the Clutter family—the murders that became the subject of Capote's masterpiece, "In Cold Blood"? The writer Dan Futterman and the director Bennett Miller tell us how, and the wonderful Philip Seymour Hoffman first captures Capote physically and then works in-

ward to the vulnerable yet rotting soul. This is easily the most intelligent and detailed film ever made about a writer's working method and character. When Capote gets a look at one of the murderers, Perry Smith (Clifton Collins, Jr.), the focus of the movie becomes the intimate, artistically necessary but morally questionable relation between artist and felon. With Catherine Keener as the novelist Harper Lee; Mark Pellegrino as Perry's partner, Dick Hickock; and Bob Balaban as the New Yorker editor William Shawn, who is pictured, bizarrely, as hungry for the bloody details of the crime.—*David Denby* (10/10/05) (In wide release.)

**CHICKEN LITTLE**

Disney's attempt to compete with Pixar at computer animation falls a bit flat. The barnyard fable, about a nerdy, alarmist chick (voiced by Zach Braff), is given an updated, almost Spielbergian spin involving flying saucers and single-parent issues. The film relies on an abundance of pop-culture references and a busy, imaginative design, but only the voice talent raises it above the mediocre. With the King of the Littles, Steve Zahn ("Stuart Little," "Dr. Dolittle 2"), as a large, Streisand-loving piglet named Runt and the always welcome Joan Cusack as Abby Mallard, the duck with a crush.—*Bruce Diones* (In wide release.)

**A CHRISTMAS STORY**

Round-faced, bespectacled Ralphie has his Christmas-gift hopes set on a two-hundred-shot carbine-action Red Ryder air rifle—in other words, a BB gun. Peter Billingsley was born to play Ralphie: even at his most relaxed, his expression is wide-eyed. He's the ideal camera subject for a director like Bob Clark ("Porky's"), who aims to bring exuberance to the obvious—and here, for once, succeeds. Our hero's home, in frigid (and fictitious) Hohman, Indiana, circa 1940 (duplicated in Cleveland circa 1983), afflicted with a sputtering furnace and rampaging hounds from the hill folk next door, supplies Clark with a setting and incidents that suit his penchant for hyperbole. And actors like Melinda Dillon and Darren McGavin as Ralphie's mom and dad enter right into Clark's preferred mode of gritty slapstick, especially when McGavin wins "electric sex" in a contest—a lamp in the shape of a female leg. Clark also co-produced and co-wrote this brisk, jolly adaptation of Jean Shepherd's memoir-like novel, "In God We Trust, All Others Pay Cash."—*Michael Sragow* (Sunshine Cinema; Dec. 23-24.)

**THE CHRONICLES OF NARNIA: THE LION, THE WITCH AND THE WARDROBE**

In the thick of wartime, four children, Peter (William Moseley), Susan (Anna Popplewell), Edmund (Skandar Keynes), and Lucy (Georgie Henley), arrive, suitably parentless, in a country house. From there it is a short step to Narnia, itself a land in conflict. Thanks to the White Witch (Tilda Swinton), a perpetual winter has descended—a curse that will vanish only with the arrival of Aslan, a messianic lion (voiced by Liam Neeson). In the hands of the director Andrew Adamson, the transplanting of C. S. Lewis's tale to the screen is a loyal affair; if the snow-crusted magic of the children's initial discovery tends to melt, revealing a pageant-like stiffness in the later scenes, that is the fault as much of the original plot as of the adaptation. Swinton, with her see-through skin and icy eyes, makes a strong and alluring case for villainy; hopes that the movie may provoke a widespread religious conversion seem a little optimistic. The most serious shortcoming is the lack of a surging musical theme; is that not essential, if this Narnian venture is to be the first of many? With James McAvoy as Mr. Tumnus, the sweet-natured and treacherous faun.—*A.L.* (12/12/05) (In wide release.)

**GOOD NIGHT, AND GOOD LUCK**

George Clooney's nifty account of Edward R. Murrow's historic prime-time assaults on Senator Joseph R. McCarthy, in 1954, imitates many of Murrow's best qualities—it's swift, elegant, grimly humorous, and effective. David Strathairn gets the suavely streamlined Murrow perfectly—the pomaded jet-black hair, the thick brows and unblinking eyes, the curt, rhyming syntax and firm emphasis. Celebrating the end of McCarthyism is only part of Clooney's game. His most serious intention appears to be to deliver a blow to the patella of a somnolent American press that, until recently, has indulged the Bush Administration's most extravagant smears and lies. He has completely succeeded. With Clooney himself as Murrow's partner, Fred Friendly, and Frank Langella as the CBS chairman William S. Paley. Robert Elswit did the black-and-white cinematography, which matches kinescopes of McCarthy's actual speeches.—*D.D.* (10/10/05) (In wide release.)

**HARRY POTTER AND THE GOBLET OF FIRE**

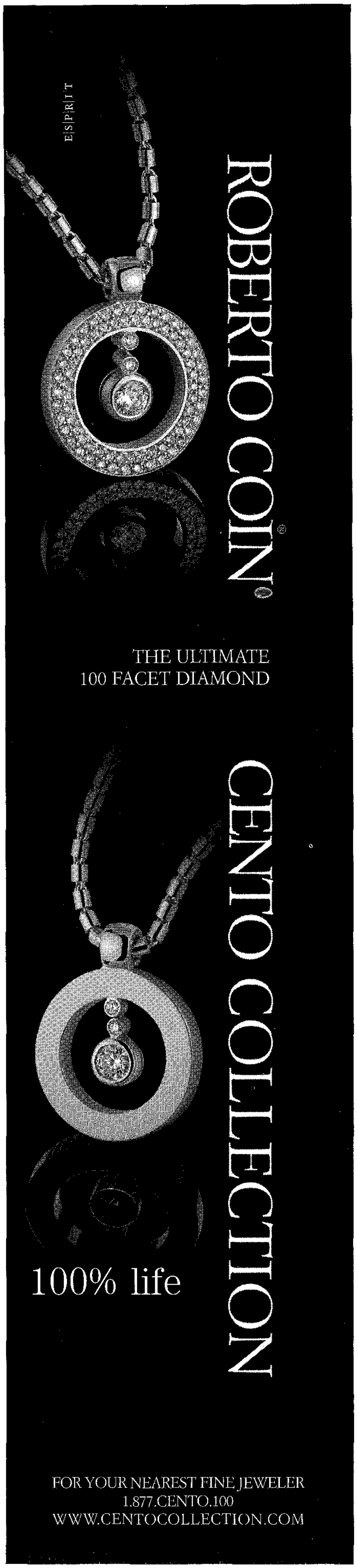
Puberty is never a pretty sight, but you have to say this for it: it doesn't let wizards off the hook. Harry Potter (Daniel Radcliffe) and his friend Ron (Rupert Grint), now in their early teens, are beset by the same vocal and emotional mayhem as their real-life equivalents. Hermione (Emma Watson) shows preternatural aplomb, but then she has been forty since the age of ten. Their pleasant existence at Hogwarts is disrupted by the arrival of two rival schools; each must furnish a contestant for the Triwizard Tournament, which is meant to demonstrate courage but actually resembles the lower strain of Japanese game show. The resulting tale is less tangled than its predecessors; the director, Mike Newell, has a surer sense of pace and a better handle on the bafflements of boarding-school life. He is stuck, however, with the grandiose requirements of the Potter franchise, which deems that every installment should rise to a final joust between good and evil, whether we like it or not. In short, the magic of Harry, on its fourth outing, is starting to wear thin. With Brendan Gleeson, who enjoys himself hugely as a rolling-eyed defender against the dark arts.—*A.L.* (11/28/05) (In wide release.)

**KING KONG**

The big guy is back—the same chocolate-doughnut nose, seriously mashed, as if he'd been sleeping face down in the jungle for decades, and the matted hair, worn natural as always. The director, Peter Jackson, who co-wrote the screenplay with Fran Walsh and Philippa Boyens, returns the pop myth to the Depression year—1933—in which the great original, directed by Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack, was made. Naomi Watts is the blonde this time—a starving, eager-to-perform vaudeville actress. When she realizes, in the jungle, that the ape isn't going to hurt her, she does corny vaudeville stuff—cartwheels and juggling and slinky Egyptian moves—and her solitary auditor, clearly amused, grunts and snorts and shifts his weight. Jack Black, rather restrained, is the reckless huckster moviemaker Denham, and Adrien Brody is the nominal hero, though he actually receives less affection from Watts than the ape does. The original and the dreadful 1976 version were about an ape that wants a blonde and can't have her, and a woman who comes to like the big dope; this version is more an impossible match between partners equally in love. Peter Jackson is a master of brilliantly colored fantasy, but the movie, more than three hours long, stops for a dinosaur show on Skull Island, and almost every scene feels padded.—*D.D.* (12/19/05) (In wide release.)

**MEMOIRS OF A GEISHA**

Rob Marshall and the screenwriters Robin Swicord and Doug Wright have turned Arthur Golden's gracefully written novel into boring spectacle. In 1929, a country girl, Chiyo, is sold into bondage at a Kyoto training house for geishas, a house ruled by the foul-tempered Mother (Kaori Momoi) and a nasty top geisha, Hatsumomo (Gong Li)—the equivalents of a wicked step-mother and stepsister. But then the teen-age Chiyo (Ziyi Zhang) is rescued by a good fairy, Mameha (Michelle Yeoh), a retired geisha who treats her kindly and teaches her the intricacies of her craft. The dramaturgy is crudely repetitive: as Hatsumomo, Gong Li is required to throw so many hissy fits that she seems less a geisha than a Mean Girl. It doesn't help that three Chinese actresses play Japanese women, and that, speaking in stilted English, their natural expressiveness is as straitened as their silk-wrapped bodies. Ziyi Zhang's geisha, lips painted in a crimson circle, does attain a surpassing elegance, but her paramount desire—to preserve her virginity for the highest bidder and then to become the mistress of a handsome married gent (Ken Watanabe)—isn't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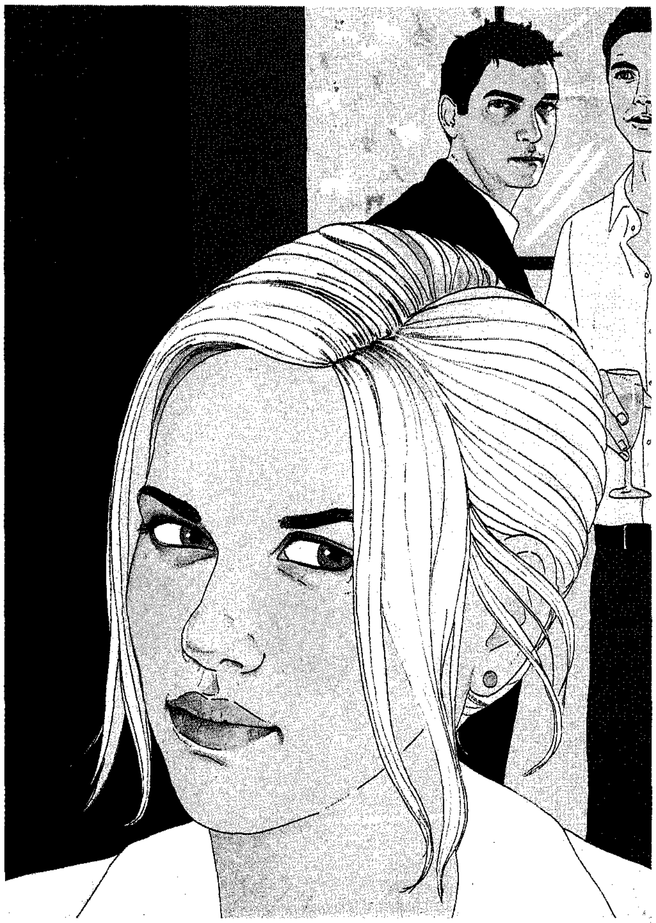
very attractive psychologically and provides little that a Western audience, without severe irony, could root for. Kyoto was reconstructed in Ventura, California.—*D.D.* (12/19/05) (In wide release.)

**MR. ARKADIN (CONFIDENTIAL REPORT)**

Acting on a million-dollar lead from a dying man in Naples, Guy Van Stratten (Robert Arden), a small-time international intriguer with a Flatbush accent, tracks down a feared global potentate, Gregory Arkadin (Orson Welles), who hires him to investigate Arkadin himself. The grandee is pained by "a conscience and no memory at all"—something like original sin—but his conscience does not prevent the bodies from piling up as Van Stratten trawls the European underworld. This fractured "Citizen Kane," built of frames within frames and mirrors within mirrors, is aptly brought to life by Welles's later style, born of low budgets and high anxiety, its grotesque closeups and cocked angles suggesting worlds and minds askew. In Welles's oracular script, Arkadin, a gleefully orotund storyteller, reveals nothing, but the film's love stories, untender tussles, are a source of bittersweet memories and bad faith: there Welles confesses all. On a seasonal note, the story turns on the difficulty of getting a goose-liver dinner in Munich on Christmas Eve. Released in 1955.—*R.B.* (Pioneer Theatre; Dec. 30.)

**MRS. HENDERSON PRESENTS**

In the nineteen-thirties, Mrs. Laura Henderson (Judi Dench), a fiercely rude and reactionary widow, took over a decrepit London theatre, the Windmill, and hired a Jewish manager-impresario, Vivian Van Damm (Bob Hoskins), to run it. As they alternately charmed and infuriated each other, the unlikely pair managed to stage nonstop musical-review shows for Londoners and then for young soldiers, continuing right through the war as bombs fell on every side. When the competition caught up to them, they hired girls to pose nude but in static tableaux so as not to alarm the official censor (Christopher Guest). Stephen Frears's new movie, written by Martin Sherman, is a valentine to British vaudeville in a gently risqué period. The picture borders on obviousness and self-love (the gallantry of the theatre people gets a little thick), but Dench and Hoskins go at each other like pros, and the pleasantly undistinguished quality of the musical numbers feels right. Mrs. Henderson, who lost her son in the First World War, apparently had the idea that boys should not die in battle before seeing a beautiful naked girl at least once.—*D.D.* (Angelika Film Center and Lincoln Plaza Cinemas.)



*"Match Point," a melodrama by Woody Allen, opens Dec. 28.*

LARA TOMLIN

**PRIDE & PREJUDICE**

Yet another Jane Austen adaptation. She must have one hell of an agent. On this occasion, Lizzie Bennet is played by Keira Knightley, who maintains the steady rate of corseted gasps that she began in "Pirates of the Caribbean"; Mr. Bennet, by Donald Sutherland, who looks richly amused, as he should, and slightly bewildered, as maybe he shouldn't; and Lizzie's older sister, the trusting Jane, by Rosamund Pike. Every reader of the book has a jealous, private notion of what Mr. Darcy should look like, and many women viewers have already testified that the latest incarnation, Matthew Macfadyen, fits the bill. Why, however, is he perennially downcast? Is he saddened by his own reputation for sternness, or has he just seen the gardening bills for his country estate? The screenwriter, Deborah Moggach, whips the tale along at a gallop, yet at times it slows beneath an unwelcome weight of mood. The director, Joe Wright, has a taste for guttering darkness and lashing rain, which suggests that he won't rest easy until he gets his hands on "Wuthering Heights." With Brenda Blethyn as the mother hen of the Bennet brood and Tom Hollander as the tiny yet preposterous Mr. Collins.—*A.L.* (11/14/05) (In wide release.)

**THE PRODUCERS**

Susan Stroman directed the smash Broadway musical that Mel Brooks (along with Thomas Meehan) adapted from his madcap 1968 film about a Broadway producer and his accountant who put on a hopefully doomed Hitler musical after learning they'd make more money from a flop than from a hit. Stroman has now directed its film version, transferring her superb musical numbers and recapturing the brilliant performances of some of the original Broadway cast. Nathan Lane, who stars as the about-to-pop Broadway impresario Max Bialystock, and Matthew Broderick, who plays the nervous, harried accountant Leo Bloom, are a great match, gleefully lobbing verbal volleys at each other. The film begins shakily, but when Broderick steps up for his first big number the sets open up, some tap-dancing beauties are brought out, and the film begins to fly like a great M-G-M musical. The surging vitality of the script allows the performers (Will Ferrell, Uma Thurman, and Roger Bart, among others) to find sure footing, and Gary Beach gives a standout performance as the drag-wearing musical director who eventually is called upon to star (his Judy Garland bit is priceless). No matter how familiar the material may seem, Stroman's intelligent direction reproduces the energy of the original.—*B.D.* (In wide release.)

**RENT**

In Chris Columbus's faithful but unimaginative film adaptation of Jonathan Larson's hugely popular Broadway musical about twenty-somethings living in self-imposed squalor in the East Village, most of the original cast and songs remain intact (Rosario Dawson and Tracie Thoms are the only newcomers). The spirit of the original, though, is deadened by the belabored re-creation of the nineteen-eighties, with oversized and meticulously grittified sets, extreme mood lighting, and distractingly fake visible breath. The movie offers fans and people who never got to see the musical a chance to hear the songs in a crisp, clean recording, but aside from a poignant story line about Angel (the graceful Wilson Jermaine Heredia), a young drag queen who loses his battle with AIDS, the simple "No Day But Today" theme is not quite enough to bring this film to life.—*Shauna Lyon* (In wide release.)

**THE SQUID AND THE WHALE**

The time is 1986, in Brooklyn's idyllic Park Slope, and a family is breaking up. The dad, Bernard (Jeff Daniels), a college literature teacher and an increasingly unsuccessful novelist, has become a sour and selfish liar; the mom, Joan (Laura Linney), can't stop leaving evidence of her love affairs around the house. Trying to hold on to their love for their parents, their two boys fall into increasingly nutty imitative behavior. Walt (Jesse Eisenberg), sixteen, parrots every one of his dad's huffy opinions; Frank (Owen Kline), a twelve-year-old in a sexual uproar, imitates his mom's indiscretions by rubbing his crotch against library shelves and leaving deposits on schoolbooks and lockers. The movie is a satirical comedy—ruthless and heartbreaking—but a comedy nonetheless; the writer-director Noah Baumbach has captured the way educated parents project their self-love and their career anxieties onto bright children, and the way kids respond to the currents of parental misconduct like pilot fish shimmying around a wayward shark. Baumbach's touch is light, sure, devastating. With Anna Paquin as a creative-writing-student hustler and William Baldwin as a sexually available tennis pro.—*D.D.* (10/24/05) (In wide release.)

**SYRIANA**

Stephen Gaghan's tense, outrageously complicated thriller—a major film but not a great one—is about oil, a corrupted C.I.A. that strong-arms for the oil companies, and the politics of the Middle East. The principal players are a large Houston-based oil concern and its Washington law firm; an emirate in the Gulf; an aging C.I.A. field operative (George Clooney); an industry analyst (Matt Damon) based in Europe; a couple of Pakistani oil workers who lose their jobs and wind up in a madrassa; and assorted terrorists, cynical bureaucrats, and bullying legal and corporate types. There is no real protagonist—or, rather, the protagonist is the oil business itself, which gets people killed, tortured, blown up, thrown on the junk heap. Gaghan constructs short, bristling scenes that often end abruptly with nasty implications hanging in the air. He hops all over the globe, and his method makes it impossible to develop anything in depth (you really have to see this movie twice in order to fully see it once), but he has a sharp tongue, moral urgency, and an amazingly fluent way with actors. With Christopher Plummer, Jeffrey Wright, Amanda Peet, and many, many others.—*D.D.* (12/5/05) (In wide release.)

**TRANSAMERICA**

In Duncan Tucker's directorial début, Felicity Huffman, in a fascinating performance, plays an overeducated, self-deprecating transsexual from L.A. named Bree (formerly Stanley) on the verge of a sex-change operation. Bree finds out that she is the father of a teen-age son, Toby (Kevin Zegers), who needs bailing out of jail in New York, and her therapist won't approve her operation unless she owns up to the kid. Despite these contrived plot devices, Bree's desire to conceal her identities from Toby—as a transsexual and as his father—feels authentic, and Zegers brings warmth to his portrayal of a lost young man trying to act tough. The thin sentimentality offered at the end is no match for Huffman, who soldiers through

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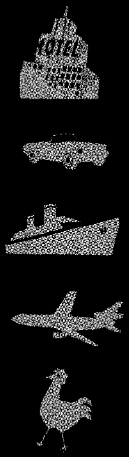

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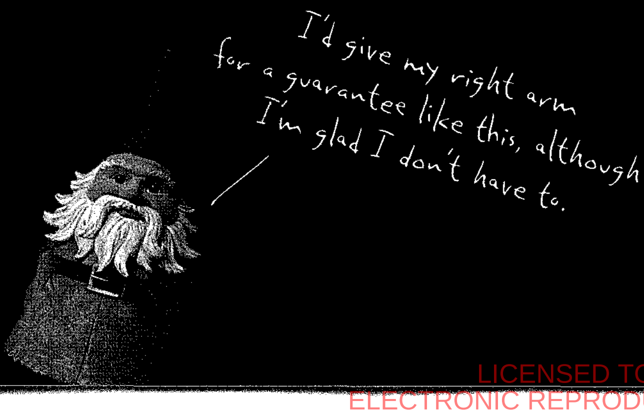
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the film with the pained bewilderment of Stanley, a woman caught in a man's body, haunting Bree's every move.—*S.L.* (IFC Center.)

**WALK THE LINE**

Joaquin Phoenix, with deep-set blue eyes, a long chin, and a scarred lip, is Johnny Cash; Reese Witherspoon, bouncy and smart, with long black tresses, is his beloved June Carter, of the country-singing Carter clan. Phoenix slings his guitar around and guns it at the audience in Cash's shambling style; his singing wavers in pitch, but, all in all, it's not bad. This bio-pic, covering Cash's youth and early manhood, written by James Mangold and Gill Dennis and directed by Mangold, is very pleasant but too conventionally conceived. Phoenix looks at times as if he wanted to kill someone, but the filmmakers haven't written anything interesting for him to say, and most of the time Cash comes off as furtive, weak, and lost. As June stares directly at Cash's weaknesses and nails him every time, "Walk the Line" becomes a kind of moralizing romantic comedy, in which he struggles to be a man worthy of her love and she struggles against her desire to have him. The picture offers some sidelong glances at life on the road in the convulsive 1955-56 period, in which country, R. & B., and nascent rock were all sloshing around together. With Robert Patrick as Cash's dead-eyed father and Ginnifer Goodwin as his first wife, who nags at him and wants him to stay home with her and the kids.—*D.D.* (11/21/05) (In wide release.)

## *Also Playing*

**THE FAMILY STONE:** In wide release. **A HISTORY OF VIOLENCE:** In wide release. **THE ICE HARVEST:** In wide release.

## REVIVALS, CLASSICS, ETC.

*Titles with a dagger are reviewed above.*

**ANTHOLOGY FILM ARCHIVES**

32 Second Ave., at 2nd St. (212-505-5181)—"NewFilmmakers Presents." A special program about radical identity adjustment. Dec. 21 at 6: "The Gift" (2003, Louise Hogarth). ♦ Dec. 21 at 7: "American Eunuchs—Designed Identity" (2004, Franco Sacchi and Gian Claudio Guiducci). ♦ Dec. 21 at 8: "Whole" (2003, Melody Gilbert). ♦ Dec. 21 at 9:30: Panel discussion.

**BAM ROSE CINEMAS**

30 Lafayette Ave., Brooklyn (718-636-4100)—"Cinema Tropical." Dec. 21 at 4:30, 6:50, and 9:15: "Días de Santiago" (2004, Josué Méndez; in Spanish). ♦ Special screening. Dec. 22 at 7: "The Shining" (1980, Stanley Kubrick).

**FILM FORUM**

W. Houston St. west of Sixth Ave. (212-727-8110)—Through Jan. 12: "Essential Hitchcock." Dec. 21 at 1, 3:30, 6:10, and 8:45 and Dec. 22 at 1 and 3:35: "North by Northwest" (1959). ♦ Dec. 22 at 6 and 9:10: "The Secret Agent" (1936). ♦ Dec. 22 at 7:40: "The Man Who Knew Too Much" (1934). ♦ Dec. 23-24 at 1:10, 3:10, 5:10, 7:10, and 9:10: "Psycho" (1960). ♦ Dec. 25-26 at 1, 3:30, 6, and 8:20: "The Man Who Knew Too Much" (1956). ♦ Dec. 27-28 at 1, 5:10, and 9:20: "Spellbound" (1945). ♦ Dec. 27-28 at 3:10 and 7:20: "Suspicion" (1941). ♦ Dec. 29 at 1, 3:30, 5:30, 7:30, and 9:30: "Notorious" (1946). ♦ Dec. 30-31 at 1:10, 3:20, 5:30, 7:40, and 9:45: "Dial M for Murder" (1954). This film will be shown in 3-D. ♦ Jan. 1-2 at 1, 3:20, 5:40, 8, and 10:20: "The Birds" (1963). ♦ Jan. 3 at 1:10, 3:40, 7, and 9:30: "Torn Curtain" (1966).

**FLORENCE GOULD HALL**

55 E. 59th St. (212-355-6160)—Through Feb. 28: "To Murder the Cinema: The Films of Marguerite Duras." Jan. 3 at 12:30, 4, and 7: "Agatha et les Lectures Illimitées" (†).

**IFC CENTER**

323 Sixth Ave., at W. 3rd St. (212-924-7771)—"Waverly Midnights." Dec. 23 and 24: "Tommy" (1975, Ken Russell). ♦ Dec. 30 and Jan. 1: "New Year's Evil" (1980, Emmett Alston). ♦ "Weekend Classics." A series of films by Rainer Werner Fassbinder. All films are in German except where noted. Dec. 24-26 and Jan. 1 at noon: "The Marriage of Maria Braun (1978). ♦ Dec. 30 at noon and Jan. 1 at 2:10: "Lola" (1981). ♦ Dec. 31 at noon and Jan. 1 at 4:15: "Veronika Voss" (1982; in German and English).

**MUSEUM OF MODERN ART**

Roy and Niuta Titus Theatres, 11 W. 53rd St. (212-708-9480)—"Bright Stars, Big City: Chinese Cinema's First Golden Era, 1922-1937." All films are silent with English intertitles or simultaneous translation. Dec. 21 at 6: "New Woman" (1935, Cai Chusheng). ♦ Dec. 21 at 8:15: "National Style" (1935, Luo Mingyou and Zhu Shilin). ♦ Dec. 22 at 6: "The Pearl Necklace" (1926, Li Zeyuan). ♦ Dec. 22 at 8:30: "Swordswoman of Huangjiang, VI" (1931, Chen Kengran and Shangguan Wu) and excerpts from "The Red Lotus Temple" (1928-1931, Zhang Sichuan). ♦ Through Jan. 8: "Artist's Choice: Stephen Sondheim." Dec. 21 at 6 and Dec. 29 at 8: "Dead of Night" (1945, Alberto Cavalcanti, Charles Crichton, Basil Dearden, and Robert Hamer). ♦ Dec. 21 at 8:15 and Dec. 29 at 6: "Elephant" (2003, Gus Van Sant). ♦ Dec. 22 at 6 and Dec. 26 at 8:30: "The Sea Wolf" (1941, Michael Curtiz). ♦ Dec. 22 at 8 and Dec. 30 at 6: "Pygmalion" (1938, Anthony Asquith and Leslie Howard). ♦ Dec. 24 at 1:30: "Character" (1997, Mike van Diem; in Dutch, English, German, and French). ♦ Dec. 24 at 4: "Contract" (1980, Krzysztof Zanussi; in Polish). ♦ Dec. 28 at 6 and Dec. 31 at 5: "The Thief of Bagdad" (1940, Ludwig Berger and Michael Powell). ♦ Dec. 28 at 8:15 and Jan. 1 at 5: "Henry Fool" (1997, Hal Hartley). ♦ Dec. 30 at 8 and Jan. 1 at 2: "High and Low" (1962, Akira Kurosawa; in Japanese). ♦ Jan. 2 at 6: "The Barbarian Invasions" (2003, Denys Arcand; in French and English). ♦ Jan. 2 at 8: "Fires on the Plain" (1959, Kon Ichikawa; in Japanese). ♦ Through Feb. 6: "Pixar: 20 Years of Animation." Dec. 23 at 6: "Toy Story" (1995, John Lasseter) and short films. ♦ Dec. 26 at 6 and Dec. 31 at 2: "A Bug's Life" (1998, Lasseter and Andrew Stanton) and short films. ♦ "Maysles Films: Five Decades." Dec. 24 at 2: "Psychiatry in Russia" (1955) and "Grey Gardens" (1976). ♦ Dec. 24 at 4:30: "Lalee's Kin: The Legacy of Cotton" (2000). ♦ Dec. 26 at 6:30: "Christo's Valley Curtain" (1974) and "Running Fence" (1978). ♦ Dec. 26 at 8:30: "Umbrellas" (1995). ♦ Dec. 28 at 6:30: "Gimme Shelter" (1970). ♦ Dec. 28 at 8:30: "What's Happening! The Beatles in the U.S.A." (1964). ♦ Dec. 29 at 5:15: "Salesman" (1968). ♦ Dec. 29 at 7: "Concert of Wills: Making the Getty Center" (1997). ♦ Dec. 30 at 6:30: "Jessye Norman Sings 'Carmen'" (1989) and "Accent on the Offbeat" (1994). ♦ Dec. 30 at 8:45: "Showman" (1963) and "Ozawa" (1985). ♦ Dec. 31 at 2: "Vladimir Horowitz: The Last Romantic" (1985). ♦ Dec. 31 at 4: "Soldiers of Music: Rostropovich Returns to Russia" (1991).

**MUSEUM OF THE MOVING IMAGE**

35th Ave. at 36th St., Astoria (718-784-0077)—"Digital Play Goes to the Movies." Dec. 23 at 7:30 and Jan. 1 at 6:30: "Tron" (1982, Steven Lisberger). ♦ Dec. 30 at 7:30: "The Warriors" (1979, Walter Hill). ♦ "Laurel and Hardy." Dec. 24 at 2 and Dec. 31 at 2: "Babes in Toyland" (1934, Gus Meins). ♦ Dec. 26-30 at 2 and Jan. 1 at 4: "Way Out West" (1937, James W. Horne). ♦ Jan. 1-2 at 2: "Talkie Shorts," program three.

**PIONEER CINEMA**

155 E. 3rd St. (212-254-3300)—"Mormonsploitation!" Dec. 21 at 7:15: "Wagon Master" (1950, John Ford). ♦ Akira Kurosawa double feature. Dec. 22 and Dec. 28 at 6:30: "Rashomon" (1950; in Japanese). ♦ Dec. 22 and Dec. 28 at 8:15: "The Seven Samurai" (1954; in Japanese). ♦ Jewish Christmas with the 14th Street Y. Dec. 25 at 4: "Funny Girl" (1968, William Wyler); the screening is followed by a Chinese-food buffet. ♦ "Bizarro Mondays." Dec. 26 at 6:30: "Jason and the Argonauts" (1963, Don Chaffey). ♦ "Beauty and the Beast" (1946, Jean Cocteau; in French). ♦ William Wyler double feature. Dec. 27 and Jan. 1 at 5: "The Little Foxes" (1941). ♦ Dec. 27 and Jan. 1 at 7:15: "The Best Years of Our Lives" (1946). ♦ Abbas Kiarostami double feature. Dec. 29 at 7: "Where Is the Friend's Home?" (1987; in Farsi). ♦ Dec. 29 at 8:45: "And Life Goes On . . ." (1991; in Farsi). ♦ Orson Welles double feature. Dec. 30 at 7: "Mr. Arkadin (Confidential Report)" (†). ♦ Dec. 30 at 9: "F for Fake" (1974; in English and French). ♦ Double feature. Dec. 31 at 7:30: "Dr. Strangelove" (1964, Stanley Kubrick). ♦ Dec. 31 at 9:15: "Rock Around the Clock" (1956, Fred F. Sears).

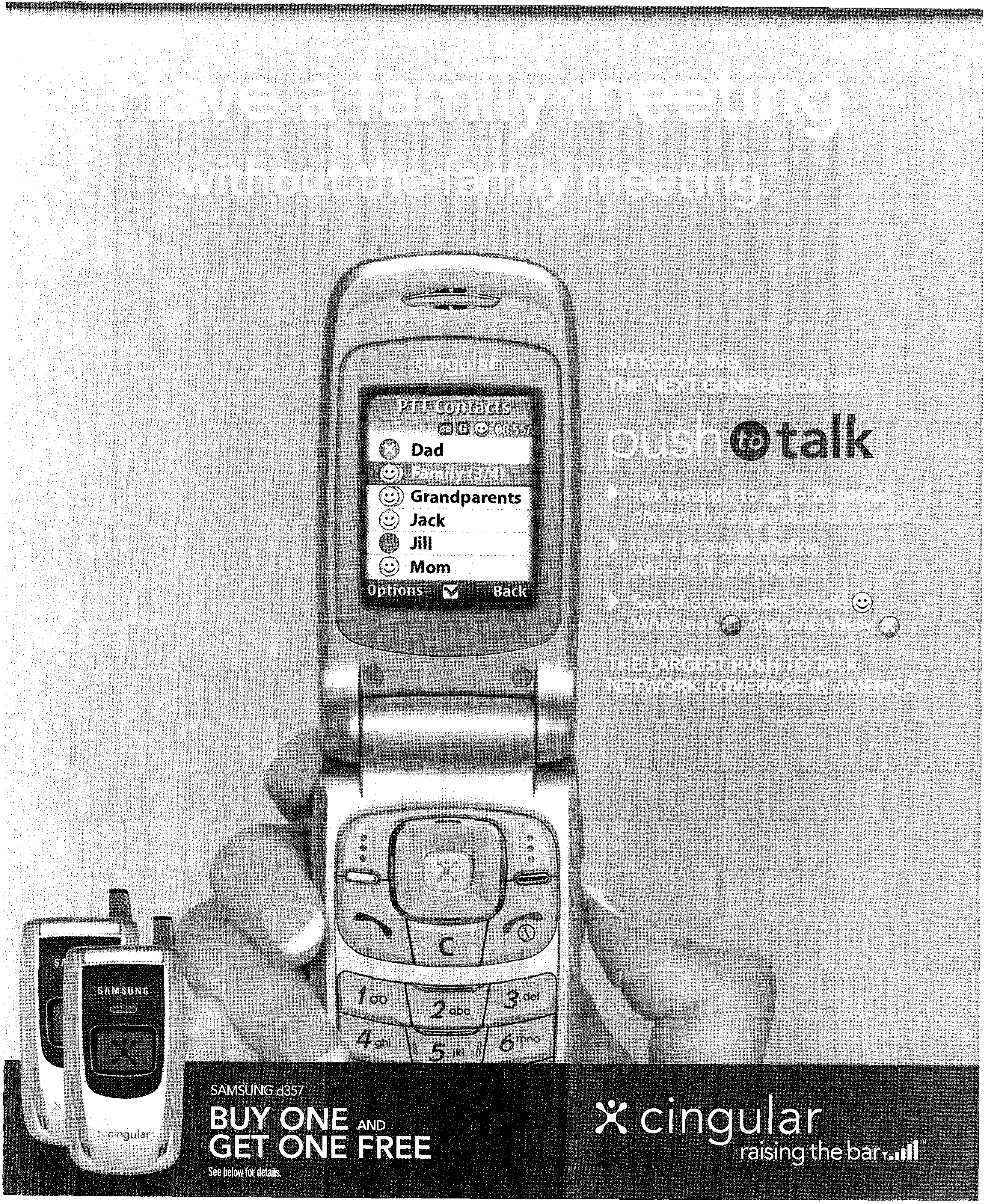
## DVD NOTES
## NOIR AND AGAIN

The American film noir of the postwar era resulted largely from the unleashing of the hyper-expressive filmmaking styles of immigrant German-speaking directors. Two new DVDs reveal the differences and similarities between two masters of the genre.

The New York police detective Mark Dixon (Dana Andrews), who has more than a dozen brutality complaints on his record, accidentally kills a man and goes to extraordinary lengths to cover up his crime. Along the way, he falls in love with the dead man's wife (Gene Tierney) and lets her father take the rap. That's the tensely ratcheted story of **"Where the Sidewalk Ends"** (Fox), a streetwise film noir that Otto Preminger directed in 1950. Despite the melodramatic intensity of the plot, Preminger works with coolly balanced two-shots and inert, opaque closeups that put the onus of moral choice on his characters without revealing their motives. Preminger, born in Vienna in 1906, the son of an attorney, earned a law degree and made his name there as a stage director of courtroom dramas. Even after establishing himself in Hollywood and expanding his range of subjects, he remained a master of ambiguity: his films were obsessed with the variety and instability of human behavior and the conflicting interpretations to which it gives rise.

Fritz Lang was also born in Vienna, in 1890, but was the son of a builder and studied to follow in his footsteps; he constructed his films, starting in 1919, as machines of perfectly fitting determinism. His Gothic film noir **"House by the River"** (Kino), also from 1950, tells the story of a failing writer, Stephen Byrne (Louis Hayward), who lusts after his young housemaid, Emily Gaunt (Dorothy Patrick). When he unintentionally kills her after a failed seduction, Byrne enlists the help of his dutiful bookkeeper brother, John (Lee Bowman), to dispose of the body, and keeps quiet as John comes under suspicion of murder. Every detail of the film, from its opening shots of the nearby river and the wind in the trees, has moral resonance. Stephen promises to change, but from the moment that he listens lasciviously to Emily's bathwater sluicing down a drainpipe his bad end is already foretold—and the elements of nature, the wind and the water, are the ultimate agents of his doom.

—*Richard Brody*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**SUNSHINE CINEMA**
143 E. Houston St. (212-330-8182)—"Sunshine@Midnight." Dec. 23-24: "A Christmas Story" (†).

**WALTER READE THEATRE**
Lincoln Center (212-875-5600)—"Spanish Cinema Now." All films are in Spanish except where noted. Dec. 21 at 1 and 7 and Dec. 26 at 6:45: "The Wretched Life of Juanita Narboni" (2005, Farida Benlyazid). ♦ Dec. 21 at 3:10 and 9:15 and Dec. 27 at 7:15: "Train of Memory" (2004, Marta Arribas and Ana Pérez; in German and Spanish). ♦ Dec. 21 at 5: "Ausentes" (2005, Daniel Calparsoro). ♦ Dec. 22 at 2 and 6:30 and Dec. 27 at 3: "Don Quijote de Orson Welles" (1992, Orson Welles and Jess Franco; in English). ♦ Dec. 22-23 at 4:15 and 8:45: "Don Quixote" (1957, Grigori Kozintsev; in Russian). ♦ Dec. 23 at 2 and 6:30 and Dec. 26 at 9: "The Hidden" (2005, Antonio Hernández). ♦ Dec. 24 and Dec. 26 at 1: "Miguel de Cervantes' Quixote" (1992, Manuel Gutiérrez Aragón). ♦ Dec. 27 at 1, 5:15, and 9:15: "Lost in La Mancha" (2002, Keith Fulton and Louis Pepe; in English, Spanish, and French). ♦ "Cartoon Musicals II." Dec. 28 at 2:30 and 6:30 and Dec. 31 at 8:30: "Rhapsody in Boop: Betty's and Popeye's Greatest Hits." ♦ Dec. 28 at 4:30 and 8:30 and Dec. 30 at 1 and 5: "Walter Lantz's 'Swing Symphonies' and 'Musical Miniatures.' " ♦ Dec. 29 at 2:30, Dec. 30 at 7, and Dec. 31 at 4:30: "Hoppity Goes to Town" (a.k.a. "Mr. Bug Goes to Town") (1941, Dave Fleischer). ♦ Dec. 29 at 4:15 and Dec. 31 at 2:30: "Raggedy Ann and Andy: A Musical Adventure" (1977, Richard Williams). ♦ Dec. 30 at 3 and 8:45 and Dec. 31 at 6:30: "The Fleischer Musicals: Singalongs and Color Classics." ♦ Jan. 1 at 2 and Jan. 2 at 1: "More Warners Cartoon Musicals." ♦ Jan. 1 at 4:15 and Jan. 2 at 3:15: "George Pal's Tunes for 'Puppetoons.'" ♦ Jan. 1 at 6 and Jan. 3 at 9: "Independently Musical." ♦ Jan. 1 at 8:30 and Jan. 3 at 1:30: "South Park: Bigger Longer & Uncut" (1999, Trey Parker). ♦ Jan. 2 at 5 and 9: "Oscar Fischinger: Musical Études." ♦ "Larry McMurtry's American West." Dec. 29 at 6:15: "Hud" (1963, Martin Ritt). ♦ Dec. 29 at 8:30: "The Last Picture Show" (1971, Peter Bogdanovich).

## READINGS AND TALKS

**"FANTASTIC FICTION"**
The science-fiction writers Jack Womack and F. Brett Cox read from their work. (K.G.B., 85 E. 4th St. No tickets necessary. Dec. 21 at 7.)

**NEW YEAR'S DAY READINGS**
Two lengthy downtown events offer the chance to start the New Year in an extended literary fashion. "Codex Solaris: The Alternative New Year's Day Spoken Word/Performance Extravaganza" gets under way at 2 at the Bowery Poetry Club and features more than a hundred and fifty performers. (308 Bowery, near Bleecker St. No tickets necessary.) ♦ The Poetry Project's thirty-second annual New Year's Day Marathon Reading starts an hour later. Patti Smith, Steve Earle, Philip Glass, Eric Bogosian, and Tracie Morris are among the scores of writers, musicians, dancers, and artists expected to appear. (St. Mark's In-the-Bowery, Second Ave. at 10th St. 212-674-0910.)

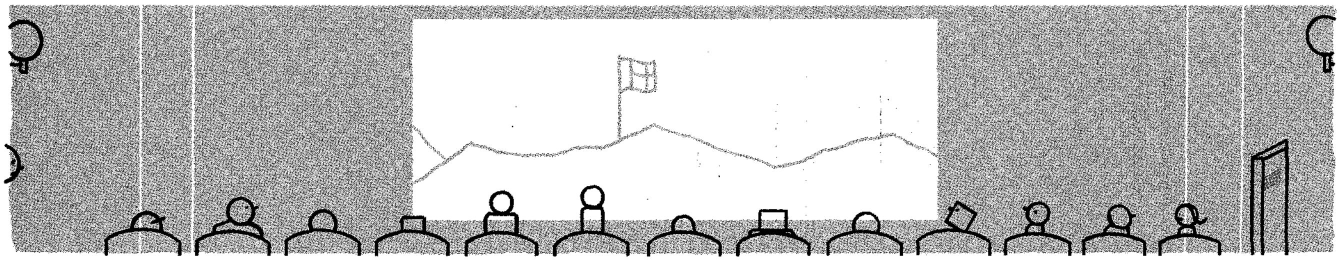
## ABOVE AND BEYOND

**BIG APPLE CIRCUS**
Manhattan's resident one-ring circus is in the midst of its twenty-eighth season with a show called "Grandma Goes to Hollywood." It stars none other than Grandma the Clown, played (as in years past) by Barry Lubin. This year's show was also written by him, and it draws on his childhood memories of accompanying his father, a projectionist, on his rounds in Atlantic City in the fifties. The Italian ventriloquist Willer Nicolodi, the Russian trapeze artists of the Garamov Troupe, the English equestrienne Yasmine Smart, and many other performers celebrate the silent films, romances, comedies, and Westerns of the silver screen. (Damrosch Park, Lincoln Center. 212-721-6500. Through Jan. 8.)

**"THE RADIO CITY CHRISTMAS SPECTACULAR"**
The high-kicking Rockettes, accompanied by Santa, elves, and live donkeys and camels, bring the joys of the season from the North Pole to Manhattan. Directed and choreographed by John Dietrich. (Sixth Ave. at 50th St. 212-247-4777. Through Jan. 2.)

**NEW YORK NATIONAL BOAT SHOW**
The annual display known to bring a tear to the eye of any self-respecting fibreglass-maker, or at least to the eye of any fiscally conservative spouse, gets under way on Dec. 31 and runs through Jan. 8. (Jacob K. Javits Convention Center, Eleventh Ave. between 34th and 39th Sts. For more information, call 212-984-7000.)

**NEW YEAR'S EVE PARTY RIDE**
The pro-bicycle, grassroots group Time's Up!—best known, perhaps, for *not* organizing the monthly Critical Mass rides, which have gained a great deal of attention in the wake of the mass arrests preceding last year's Republican National Convention—is organizing a group ride from the arch in Washington Square Park to Belvedere Castle, in Central Park, where there'll be fireworks, music, and dancing. (Dec. 31, starting at 10:30. For more information, call 212-802-8222, or visit www.times-up.org.)



LAURENT CILLUFFO

## ON THE HORIZON

### NIGHT LIFE
### BARE'S BACK

*Jan. 18*

It's been twenty-two years since the country legend Bobby Bare recorded a disk of new material, and it's been nearly as long since he played New York City. Bare recently released the album "The Moon Was Blue"; next month he comes to Joe's Pub. (212-239-6200.)

### MOVIES
### CRITICS' PICKS

*Jan. 7-Feb. 12*

The theme of the seventh annual New York Film Critics Circle series at the Museum of the Moving Image is "Foreign Affairs." Among the notable selections are Alain Resnais's "Hiroshima Mon Amour," presented by Matt Zoller Seitz; Werner Herzog's "Stroszek," selected by Michael Atkinson; and Michelangelo Antonioni's American nightmare, "Zabriskie Point," introduced by J. Hoberman. (718-784-0077.)

### CLASSICAL MUSIC
### OLÉ!

*Jan. 15*

The 92nd Street Y, long the center for New York guitar concerts, offers "450 Years of the Spanish Guitar," a one-day marathon featuring performances by such masters as Jason Vieaux, Paul O'Dette, Pepe Romero, and Eliot Fisk. (212-415-5500.)

### THE THEATRE
### MAN IN BLACK

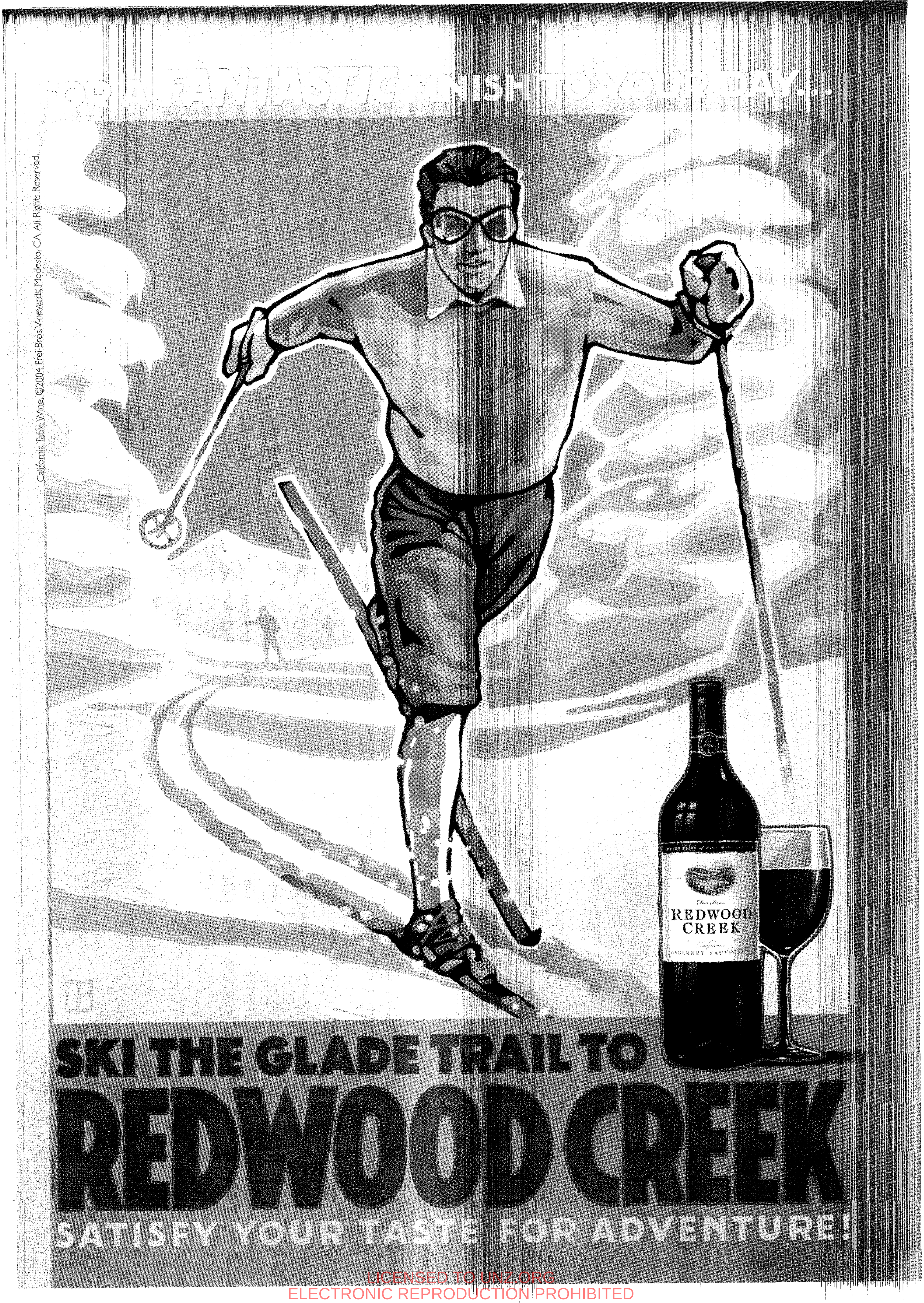
*Feb. 8*

The late, great country singer Johnny Cash, the subject of the recent bio-pic starring Joaquin Phoenix, "Walk the Line," will remain in the spotlight for a few more months thanks to a new musical, "Ring of Fire." The show, directed by Richard Maltby, Jr., at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre, uses thirty-eight Cash songs to tell its stories. (212-239-6200.)

### ART
### IT'LL BE A SCREAM

*Feb. 19-May 8*

Edvard Munch (1863-1944), the Norwegian painter whose iconic works hold a particular fascination for art thieves—one of four versions of "The Scream" was stolen from the Munch Museum in Oslo last year—hasn't had a major U.S. retrospective in more than thirty years. MOMA remedies the situation with a show subtitled "The Modern Life of the Soul."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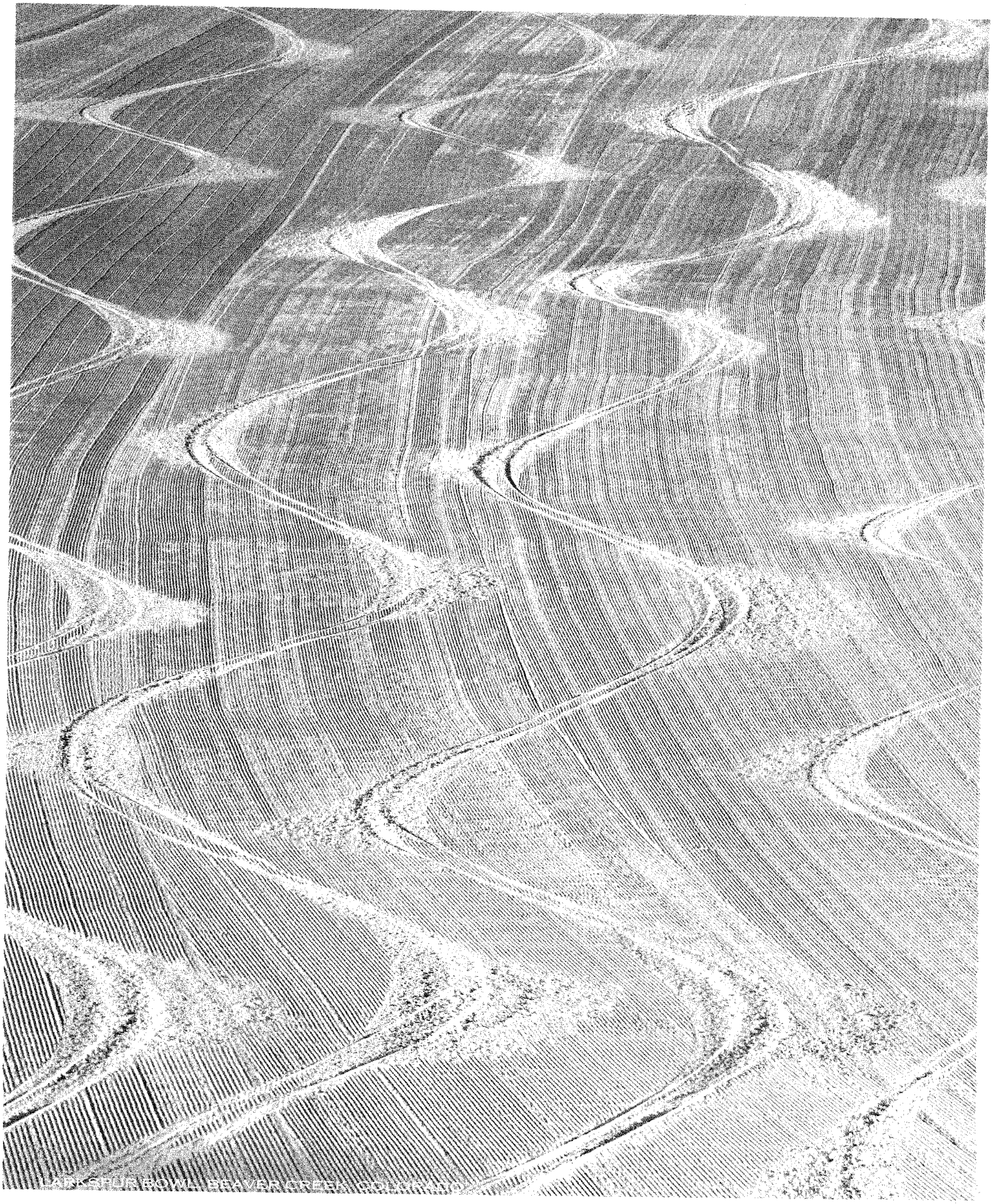
*Yes*, VILLAGE LIFE HAS A HARMONIOUS EFFECT ON THE FAMILY.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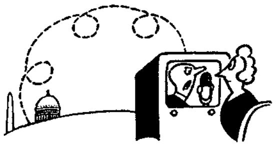
*Beaver Creek. Not exactly roughing it.*

THE NEW YORKER

# THE TALK OF THE TOWN

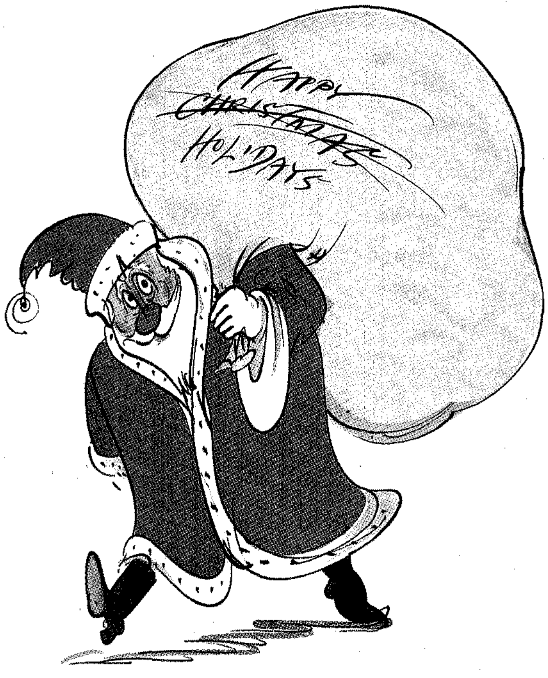
## COMMENT
## BAH HUMBUG



Chestnuts are roasting on an open fire, with Jack Frost nipping at your nose and folks dressed up like Eskimos—or, to update the line for political correctness, with tots in boots just like Aleuts. It's that magical season when lights twinkle and good will abounds. It's time again for the thrill that comes but once a year: the War on Christmas.

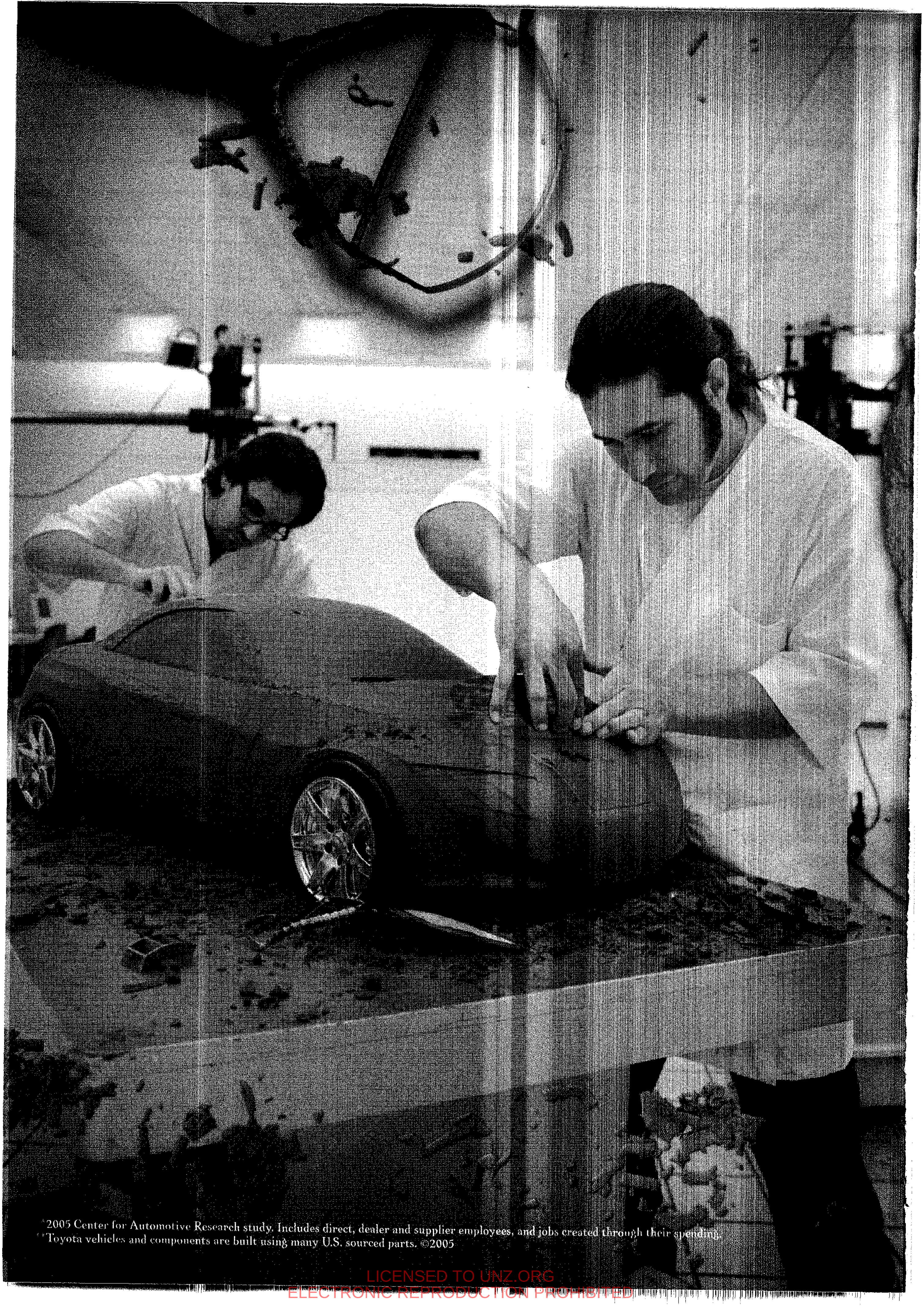
The War on Christmas is a little like Santa Claus, in that it (a) comes to us from the sky, beamed down by the satellites of cable news, and (b) does not, in the boringly empirical sense, exist. What does exist is the idea of the War on Christmas, which, though forever new, is a venerable tradition, older even than strip malls and plastic mistletoe. Christmas itself, in something like its recognizably modern form, with gifts and cards and elves, dates from the early nineteenth century. The War on Christmas seems to have come along around a hundred years later, with the publication of "The International Jew," by Henry Ford, the automobile magnate, whom fate later punished by arranging to have his fortune diverted to the sappy, do-gooder Ford Foundation. "It is not religious tolerance in the midst of religious difference, but religious attack that they"—the Jews—"preach and practice," he wrote. "The whole record of the Jewish opposition to Christmas, Easter and certain patriotic songs shows that." Ford's anti-Semitism has not aged well, thanks to the later excesses of its European adherents, but by drawing a connection between Christmas-bashing and patriotism-scorning he pointed the way for future Christmas warriors.

Over the next few decades, when the country was preoccupied with the Depression, the Second World War, and going to movies like "It's a Wonderful Life," the W. on C. went into remission. But at the end of the placid nineteen-fifties the John Birch Society, a pioneering organization of the bug-eyed right, took up the Yuletide cudgels. As Michelle Goldberg recalled recently in *Salon*, a 1959 Birch pamphlet warned that "the Reds" and "the U.N. fanatics" had launched an "assault on Christmas" as "part of a much broader plan, not only to promote the U.N., but to destroy *all* religious beliefs and customs." The enemy's strategy, the Birchers warned, was to aim at the soft underbelly and shake it like a bowlful of jelly. "What they now want to put over on the American people is simply this: Department stores throughout the country are to utilize U.N. symbols and emblems as Christmas decorations." The focus on department stores was a prophetic insight, but its full potential as a weapon in Christmas warfighting was not realized until the next century.

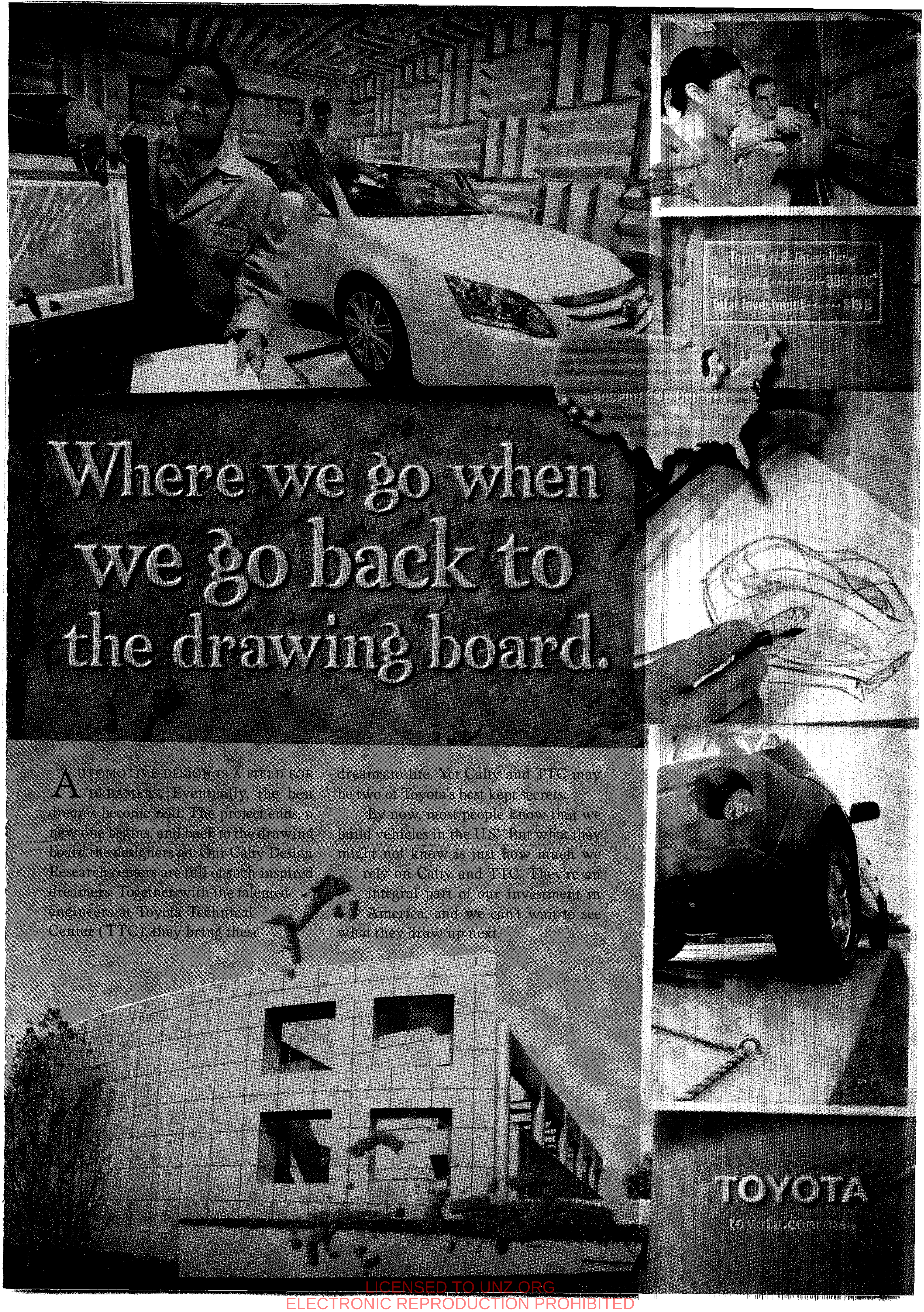


Today's Christmas Pentagon is the Fox News Channel, which during a recent five-day period carried no fewer than fifty-eight different segments about the ongoing struggle, some of them labelled "CHRISTMAS UNDER ATTACK." One of Fox's on-air warriors is John Gibson, whose new book, "The War on Christmas: How the Liberal Plot to Ban the Sacred Christian Holiday Is Worse Than You Thought," presents itself as the definitive word. So one opens it eagerly with hopes

ILLUSTRATIONS BY GERALD SCARFE



*2005 Center for Automotive Research study. Includes direct, dealer and supplier employees, and jobs created through their spending.
**Toyota vehicles and components are built using many U.S. sourced parts. ©2005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AUTOMOTIVE DESIGN IS A FIELD FOR DREAMERS. Eventually, the best dreams become real. The project ends, a new one begins, and back to the drawing board the designers go. Our Calty Design Research centers are full of such inspired dreamers. Together with the talented engineers at Toyota Technical Center (TTC), they bring these dreams to life. Yet Calty and TTC may be two of Toyota's best kept secrets.

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of learning what this war actually consists of. These hopes are soon dashed—or, rather, fulfilled, since it turns out to consist of very little. Gibson provides a half-dozen or so anecdotes, padded out to stupefying length, in which a school board or a city hall renames its Christmas break a winter break or declines to rename its winter break a Christmas break, or removes Christmas trees from the lobbies of government buildings and then restores them after people complain. "The war on Christmas," the author concludes triumphantly, "is joined."

Gibson is a mere grunt in Fox's army. Bill O'Reilly, the network's most prominent religio-political commentator, is its Patton. The shortage of anti-Christmas atrocities (plus the fact that the U.N. fanatics long ago switched to subverting Halloween) may explain why he has concentrated on department stores, many of which, in their ads or via their salespeople, wish people "Happy Holidays" instead of—or in addition to, or more frequently than—"Merry Christmas." (In 1921, Henry Ford attacked from the opposite flank, sneering that "the strange inconsistency of it all is to see the great department stores of the Levys and the Isaacs and the Goldsteins and the Silvermans filled with brilliant Christmas cheer.")

O'Reilly sat out Vietnam. In the war on the War on Christmas, however, he not only has been in the trenches but has gone over the top. "I am not going to let oppressive, totalitarian, anti-Christian forces in this country diminish and denigrate the holiday!" he said the other day. And, "I'm going to use all the power that I have on radio and television to bring horror into the world of people who are trying to do that!" And, "There is no reason on this earth that all of us cannot celebrate a public holiday devoted to generosity, peace, and love together!" And, "And anyone who tries to stop us from doing it is gonna face me!"

O'Reilly sees the War on Christmas as part of the "secular progressive agenda," because "if you can get religion out, then you can pass secular progressive programs like legalization of narcotics, euthanasia, abortion at will, gay marriage." Just as Christmas itself evolved as a way to synthesize a variety of winter festivals, so the War on Christmas fantasy is a way of grouping together a variety of enemies, where they can all be rhetorically machine-gunned at once. But the suspicion remains that a truer explanation for Fox's militancy may be, like so much else at Yuletide, business. Christmas is the big retail season. What Fox retails is resentment.

In this war, no weapons of Christmas destruction have been found—just a few caches of linguistic oversensitivity and commercial caution. Christmas remains robust: even Gibson says in his book that in America Christmas celebrators (ninety-six per cent) outnumber Christians (eighty-four per cent). But the "Happy Holidays" contagion has probably spread too far to be wiped out. "President Bush and I wish everyone a very happy holiday," Laura Bush says sweetly on a video posted on the White House Web site. And even the Fox News online store advertised, until a couple of weeks ago, "The O'Reilly Factor Holiday Ornament." ("Put your holiday tree in 'The No Spin Zone.' ")

John Lennon, who died in this city, at this season, twenty-five years ago, didn't bother with "Happy Holidays" and the like. In 1971, he and his wife, Yoko Ono, wrote and recorded a song that has become a classic. Here's its final verse:

> A very Merry Christmas
> And a happy New Year
> Let's hope it's a good one
> Without any fear
> War is over, if you want it
> War is over now.

That's the spirit, John. You bet we want it. And Merry Christmas to all.

*—Hendrik Hertzberg*

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## COLLEGE TRY

## BAGHDAD TO SWARTHMORE

A group of enterprising students at Swarthmore College, in Pennsylvania, has some advice for the politically disaffected: If you find the media's Iraq coverage unsatisfactory, pick up the phone. Don't call the *Times*, or CNN, or Rupert Murdoch; call Baghdad. There are a couple of Iraqi phone books available on the Internet, and plenty of interesting people willing to share their stories directly, from six thousand miles away, many of them speaking decent English. When your phone bill starts to get out of hand, try downloading Skype, software that allows two people to talk free, from anywhere in the world, using computer microphones and a headset.

Amelia Templeton, a senior history major, estimates that she has spoken with twenty-five Iraqis over the past year, and now, as she said the other day, "it's a bad idea to ask me about Iraq unless you plan on listening for a while." One of the Iraqis she spoke with, a painter named Esam Pasha, who is a grandson of the former Prime Minister Nuri al-Said, has even invited her to visit Baghdad. "I was told that if I came he'd pick me up at the airport," she said. "Given what that road is like, how dangerous it is going to and from the airport, that's quite an offer."

Templeton is one of the editors at War News Radio, a weekly half-hour show broadcast on the Swarthmore campus station, and podcast over the Web, where it draws as many as three thousand listeners a day. The show's stated aim is to "rediscover the voices of real people" in Iraq. It is supervised by Marty Goldensohn, a thirty-year veteran of public radio, who offered the students this essential kernel of advice: "Mumble with authority." He also said, "When you call the Pentagon, you just say, as if you were the New York *Times*, 'I'm calling from War News Radio.' You say it as if it were *their* failing if they haven't heard of us."

The students began, two semesters ago, by creating a homemade sound studio, using bulletin boards and egg cartons hung from ceiling pipes. Now, thanks to the college, they've got proper acoustic tiling, although space heaters are still required to supplement the building's old radiator, and the reporters sometimes wear ski jackets and hats while manning the phones. They have secured interviews, in recent weeks, with the C.E.O. of the new Iraqi Stock Exchange, an aspiring filmmaker in Baghdad, and the Sunni politician Adnan Pachachi. In one broadcast, an Iraqi doctor, referring to the mood at the checkpoints, said, "Everybody feels terrified; everything around is horrible, and you expect that you may be killed at any minute." (His daughter had been shot, he said, by U.S. soldiers.)

Last month, an American expat who

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resolution to discuss
your resolutions.

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runs an FM station in Canberra, Australia, e-mailed the studio and asked for permission to rebroadcast the show. Carleton College has picked up War News Radio as well. And last week Goldensohn was preparing to send out a mailing to more than a thousand other schools, soliciting further interest.

"We thought we were at a disadvantage not being on the ground in Iraq," Eva Barboni, a junior poli-sci major, said. "But when you hear from reporters there that they can't even leave their hotels you start to think." The sound quality afforded by Skype, it turns out, is often better than what can be achieved over the weak landlines in the Green Zone.

"If you're working for a big American network, with a film crew following you, you're not going to get out on the streets in Baghdad," Wren Elhai, a sophomore, said. "We can do a lot from here that the networks can't do."

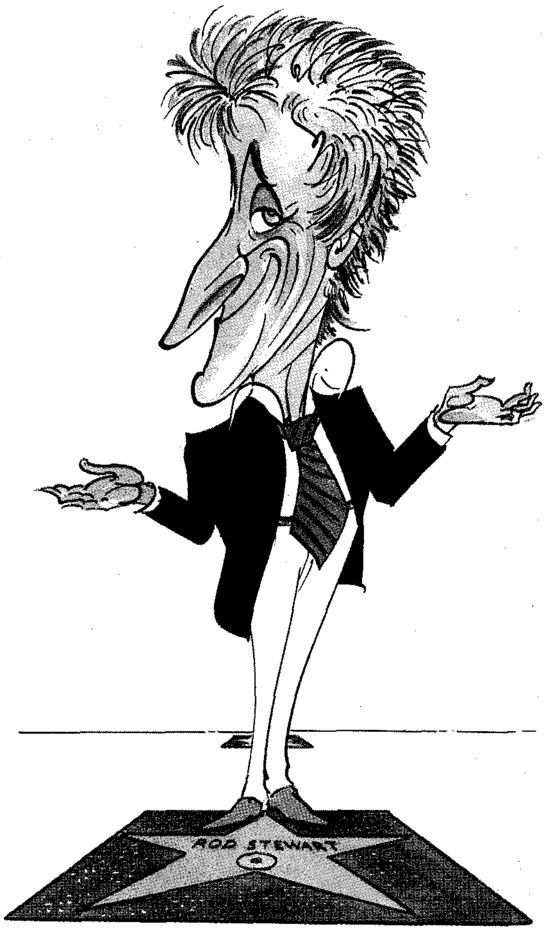
Elhai is the group's designated pronouncer of Iraqi names and words. "I'm just the one who can do the Iraqi accent best," he said. "My favorite word, and it's unfortunate how often you hear it, is 'corruption.' Iraqis have that wonderful rolled 'r.' " Elhai was in the process of editing a story about an Iraqi contractor, a frequent victim of government corruption, before heading off to a rehearsal for his a-cappella singing group.

One drawback of the long-distance approach, of course, is that you can't be sure whom you're talking to. Templeton, while working on a segment about a typical Iraqi teen-ager, ended up speaking with a father she later came to suspect of being a Baath Party official. She killed the story. "I thought maybe they weren't the average," she said.

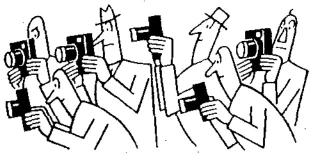
Esam Pasha's offer to pick Templeton up at the airport, meanwhile, remains unfulfilled. "I don't want to be another American who's potentially putting the people working with him in danger," she said.

When not telephoning Iraq, the War News team occupy themselves with critiquing the President's speeches (Kurt Vonnegut has appeared on the show as a commentator), assessing the ongoing media coverage ("Where are the pictures of shrapnel wounds and weeping mothers that etched the Vietnam War in American minds?"), and interviewing soldiers' parents. Recently, a reporter, Tevye Kelman, went undercover and visited an Army recruiting station in Philadelphia. Midway through the interview, the recruiter asked Kelman, a senior, when he'd last smoked pot. "Last weekend," he replied.

—*Ben McGrath*



## L.A. POSTCARD
## STARDUST



In October, when Rod Stewart made an appearance on Hollywood Boulevard to unveil his star on the Walk of Fame, perhaps no one was prouder than Marcy Braunstein, a fifty-two-year-old woman from Pittsburgh. Braunstein is the ultimate Rod Stewart fan. This becomes evident to anyone who visits her house and stumbles upon her Rod Room—a cramped space that contains more memorabilia than one might find in a modest Presidential library. These mementos include a framed dress shirt that Rod once wore and a water glass that Rod sipped from on the set of "Oprah."

"I like to joke that if my husband and I ever had kids my Rod Room would be a nursery," Braunstein said recently. "But it's not. It's a Rod Room instead."

Braunstein is proud of her obsession. "I will chat online with other Rod fans, and we will often say that we are going through 'Rod withdrawal' or we need a 'Rod fix,'" she said. Braunstein typically satisfies this need by following Stewart on tour and dragging her husband, David Jones, along. Jones is not a Rod fan. "I'm going to be honest," he said. "There is no way I could put my foot down. If I tried, it would be, like, 'You can go, because Rod is staying.'"

Several years ago, on one of these road trips, Braunstein and Jones passed through Hollywood and discovered that Rod Stewart did not have a star on the Walk of Fame. Braunstein called the Hollywood Chamber of Commerce and demanded an explanation. The explanation was simple: no one had ever nominated Rod. So Braunstein filled out a nomination form and began raising money for the fifteen-thousand-dollar fee that would be required if and when Rod's star was approved.

Getting a star on the Walk of Fame is an arduous process that involves procuring approval from the (honorary) mayor of Hollywood, who is an eighty-two-year-old former talk-show host named Johnny Grant. According to Grant, he is constantly being buttonholed by would-be inductees. "I was at a funeral the other day and someone was pitching me to be on the Walk of Fame!" he said. Grant says that the process can be contentious, with officials bickering over who is a bona-fide celebrity and who isn't: "We've got one guy on the Chamber committee who says, for every nomination, 'Why would you want to give that asshole a star?'"

Rod Stewart's nomination sailed through without incident. And so, on October 11th, several hundred people, including Stewart, Grant, and Braunstein, gathered on Hollywood Boulevard. Grant sat in a folding chair, leaning forward on a cane and uttering pleasantries to passing young women: "Hey, looking good, baby. Are you on the menu?" He stood up to greet Braunstein, who told him all about the Rod Room. "That's nuts!" Grant said after she walked away. "Still, thank God for fans like that, who keep the business going."

Several minutes later, Rod Stewart, who is sixty, showed up with four of his children and his fiancée, Penny Lancaster, who was pregnant (she delivered a boy, Alastair Wallace Stewart, a few weeks later). He wore white pants, a black blazer, and an orange tie. The crowd roared, and Marcy Braunstein's eyes misted with tears. "I can't believe this is finally happening," she whispered. Grant escorted Stewart and Braunstein onto a stage, where he tried to make a speech over the noise of the spectators, who were shouting, "Rod! Rod! Rod!" Finally, he said, "Enough! You just blew out my hearing aid."

Later, at her hotel, Braunstein said that she was enormously pleased with the day's events, except for one thing: she had failed to acquire any new exhibits for her Rod Room. So the following day she drove to Stewart's house, in the Hollywood Hills, to ask him to sign her copy of the original 45 of "Maggie May." When she arrived at the front gate, she spoke her name into a security intercom, and the gate swung open. She drove in slowly, clutching the steering wheel with one hand and snapping photographs with the other. At the top of the driveway, a personal assistant appeared and explained that Mr. Stewart was in the shower but that he would gladly sign the record and mail it back to her. "So it all worked out," she said.

—*Jake Halpern*

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## CONTRABAND DEPT.
## MAGNUM P.I.*S*

West Nile fever and bedbugs behind us, the city was rife last week, after the back-to-back murders of the policemen Dillon Stewart and Daniel Enchautegui, with talk of another plague: illegal guns. Twenty thousand uniformed officers showed up for each funeral, Mayor Bloomberg challenged legislators to "stand up and start doing something about this terrible scourge," and the *Post* introduced a special logo featuring a compact pistol and the words "The Gun Menace."

Amid this burst of activity, Jim Mintz, a private investigator, was working quietly behind the steel doors of his Tribeca office. Mintz is the principal of the James Mintz Group, a firm whose employees include former officials from the F.B.I., the N.Y.P.D., and Scotland Yard, and which has helped such institutions as Reebok, Morgan Stanley, the Beatles, and Ivana Trump unearth, as Mintz once wrote, "dirty little secrets." About a year ago, Mintz was hired by the city to assist with its anti-gun lawsuit, which seeks to hold gun manufacturers and distributors responsible for turning a blind eye to the illegal gun trade. Mintz's task is to trace the flow of firearms into New York City.

"It's I-95, on down," Mintz said, sitting at a conference table. "You drive to North Carolina or Georgia and find a person who has a driver's license—you can buy ten or fifteen guns at once." (Ninety-two per cent of the illegal guns recovered in New York City between 1998 and 2003 were from out of state.) For the past few years, investigators have been gathering information on the gun shops that sell weapons to New York traffickers. Eric Proshansky, a lawyer for the city who is working on the suit, chimed in: "They're often mom-and-pop stores out in the woods."

Mintz got up and walked over to a giant chalkboard. "Here's what happens," he said, and began to draw a flowchart. "You have the manufacturer, who trucks the boxes over to the distributor, who delivers the guns to the dealer, a store, or a pawnshop. In walks the straw man." He explained that a straw man is a person to whom a criminal pays twenty-five or fifty dollars to buy a gun on his behalf—a more sinister version of the underage drinker's "Hey, Mister" procurement scheme. The straw man is often a woman. "It could be an attractive woman, or a woman on welfare who needs the money badly," Proshansky said. "Often, the trafficker is standing right next to her, doing all the shopping, handling the guns, asking the prices," Mintz said. "The dealer can see the trafficker counting out the money right there."

Inexpensive pistols are a mainstay of the black market. "The old term is Saturday-night special," Proshansky said. "Now you've got Hi-Point, which makes a small, easily concealable handgun that turns up in a lot of crimes," he said. (In a voluminous online discussion of "What kind of man buys a Hi-Point?" one respondent compared the guns to "cheap pisswater beer." The company's marketing aims low, too. "Don't Be Discouraged by the 'Gun Snobs,' " a brochure reads.) Proshansky continued, "Taurus, a Brazilian company, also makes cheap guns." Jay-Z refers to the brand in his song "Don't You Know" ("Shit, I carry two Taurus"); the company is included, along with makers such as Beretta, Smith & Wesson, Glock, and Ruger, in the city's lawsuit, which also names individual distributors such as Chattanooga Shooting Supplies, Dixie Shooters Supply, and Glenn Zanders Fur and Sporting Goods, of Baldwin, Illinois.

New York's gun trade, according to Mintz, is carried out on a piecemeal basis, mostly by small-time criminals. Retailing for as little as seventy-nine dollars, a weapon can be had on the street for a couple of hundred. "These guys take orders and drive down and fill them," Proshansky said. "They talk on their cell phones coming back into the city: 'We'll be there in a couple of hours!' "

Like collectibles on eBay, the most desired products come with intact packaging. "They're more valuable if they're what's called 'fresh in the box,' " Mintz said. "Wrapped up in newspapers isn't as good." (A used gun may come with previous crimes attached.)

On December 2nd, a federal judge in Brooklyn ruled that, despite Congress's recent passage of a law that protects gun dealers from litigation, the city's lawsuit will be allowed to continue. One part of its case will be the testimony of illicit gun dealers and straw men, dozens of whom Mintz and his team have tracked down. How does he get them to talk? "They're in jail," Proshansky said. "They don't have anything else to do."

—*Lauren Collins*

# THE FINANCIAL PAGE

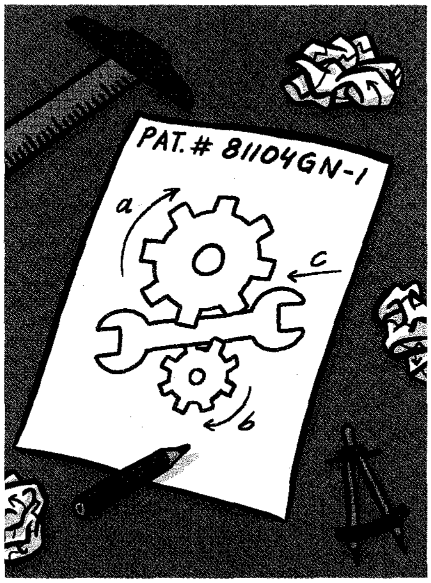
## BLACKBERRY PICKING

Since it was introduced, in 1999, the BlackBerry, a handheld device that provides wireless e-mail access, has become not only an enormous financial success—nearly three million Americans now use one—but also the quintessential symbol of today's connected world. Last month, though, it became clear that a patent-infringement case could force the BlackBerry's manufacturers, a Canadian company called Research in Motion, to kill the service in the United States by the end of the year. Then the BlackBerry will become the quintessential symbol of something else: a patent system that is out of control.

The trouble for R.I.M. started in 2001, when it was sued by a small Virginia company called N.T.P. for infringing on five patents that described the design and operation of a primitive wireless e-mail network. In 2003, a judge granted an injunction saying that R.I.M. needed to cut a deal with N.T.P. or shut down the BlackBerry service. R.I.M. appealed, but to no avail. The injunction is still in place, and R.I.M.'s only chance of keeping the BlackBerry alive is to pay N.T.P. an enormous ransom—informed estimates run as high as a billion dollars. What's more, there's speculation that, once R.I.M. settles, N.T.P. could go after the cellular companies—Cingular, T-Mobile, and so on—that offer the BlackBerry.

Fair enough, you might say. After all, we want to reward innovation and protect people from having their ideas stolen. Unfortunately, the real innovations in this case are not technological but legal. N.T.P. is a company without employees or products. It never tried to build a real business around its patents, and it never licensed them to others, until R.I.M. demonstrated just how lucrative wireless e-mail could be. No one alleges that R.I.M. used N.T.P.'s patents to build the BlackBerry; it invented its system from scratch. N.T.P., holding the patent on an idea and a crude design, waited until another company created a successful business based on similar ideas, and then headed to court. It is not alone in such endeavors. There are many companies, known unaffectionately as "patent trolls," that thrive by suing other companies. Close to three thousand multimillion-dollar patent lawsuits (some valid, some questionable) are now filed annually—a number that has more than doubled in the past fifteen years—and many of them rely on what a federal judge termed "a combination of blitzkrieg and Shermanesque tactics."

Over the past two decades, the U.S. has taken the view that the stronger patents are, the better. But patents, by their nature, are imperfect. They may encourage innovation, but, by allowing the patent holder complete control of an invention, they also limit it. Patents reward some inventors at the expense of others: more than one person can have an idea, but only one can patent it. That may be why, in a study of a hundred and fifty years of patent protection, Josh Lerner, of the Harvard Business School, found that countries that introduced stronger protections for patents saw no increase in innovation by their citizens. Similarly, in a study of nineteenth-century innovation based on data from two World's Fairs, Petra Moser, an economist then at Berkeley, found that countries with patent laws (like Britain) did not innovate more than those without them (like the Netherlands and Denmark).

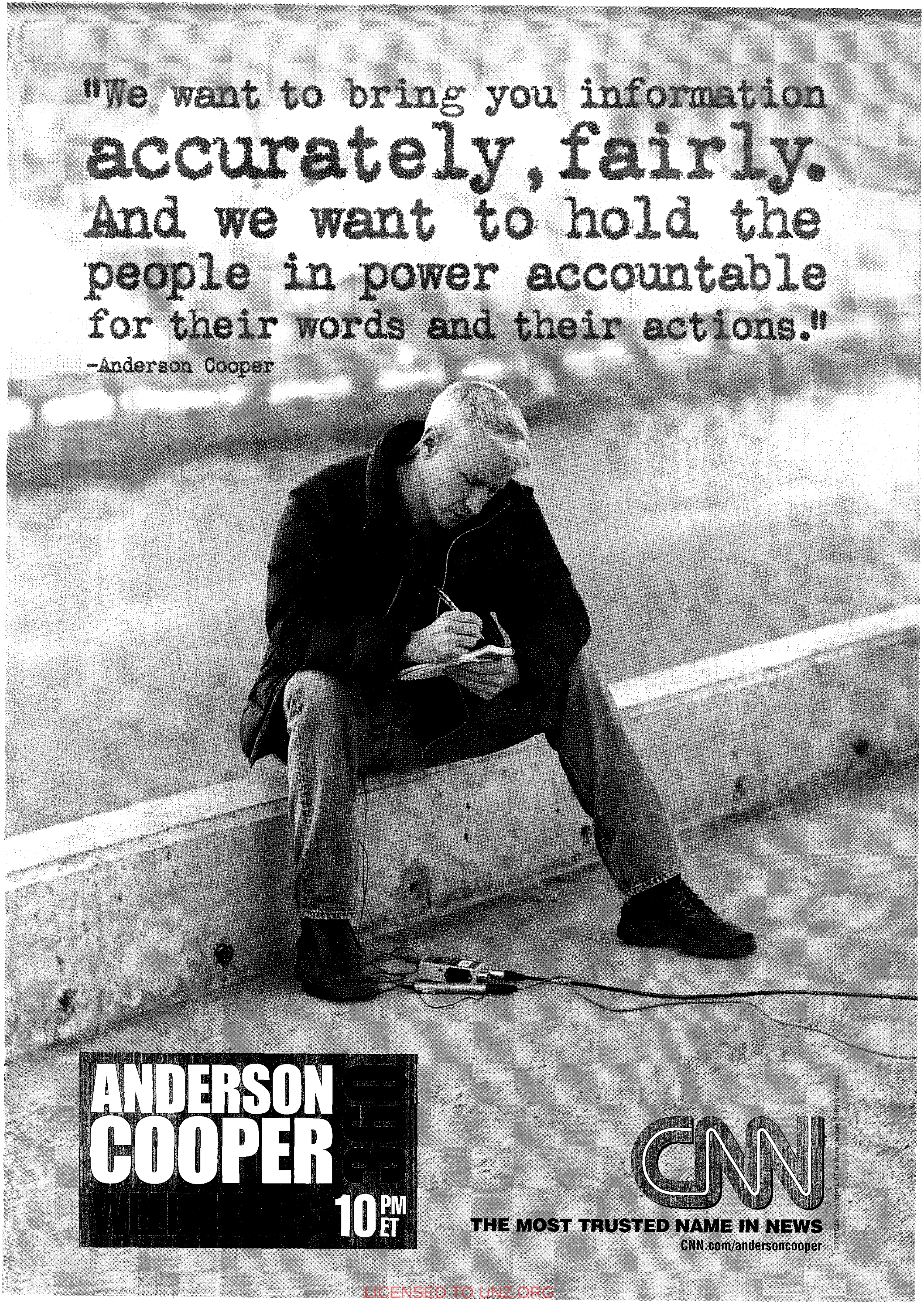


Protecting patent holders' rights is important, of course, but the system needs to be rigorous in the way it hands out patents—careful not to grant patents for ideas that are obvious, already well established, or too broad. And it needs to be nuanced in matters of enforcement, weighing the interests of society alongside those of the patent holder. The U.S. fails on all counts. In the first place, too many patents are granted. According to a recent National Academy of Sciences report, ninety-five per cent of all patent applications in the U.S. are approved, compared with just sixty-five per cent in Europe and Japan. Understaffing at the United States Patent and Trademark Office—there are thirty-four hundred examiners and three hundred and fifty thousand applications a year—means that patent examiners don't have enough time to properly research an idea's originality. And since the office is funded by patent fees, as opposed to getting its budget from Washington, it has a financial incentive to process applications as quickly, rather than as diligently, as possible. (Generally, examiners spend somewhere between eleven and twenty-two hours per patent, and no extra time is allocated for commercially significant applications.) The appellate court responsible for patent cases also tends to be patent-holder-friendly. Injunctions of the kind that N.T.P. got against R.I.M., for instance, are usually employed only to prevent "irreparable harm," but in patent cases they are now routine.

Patents, then, have never been easier to get or more lucrative to hold. Unsurprisingly, people have been patenting everything in sight. Since 1980, the number of applications has tripled, and the number of patents granted has nearly quadrupled, effectively allowing patent holders to rope off more and more of the economy, even though the quality of patents has been steadily declining. (A recent Federal Trade Commission report warned that "questionable patents are a significant competitive concern and can harm innovation.") The BlackBerry mess is a case in point: in the past year, the Patent Office has reëxamined N.T.P.'s eight patents, and issued preliminary rulings declaring them, and the nineteen hundred claims they contain, invalid. Until those patents are formally invalidated, however, R.I.M. is still on the hook, so it may end up paying for infringements that it never committed. Now, that's innovative.

—*James Surowiecki*

CHRISTOPH NIEMANN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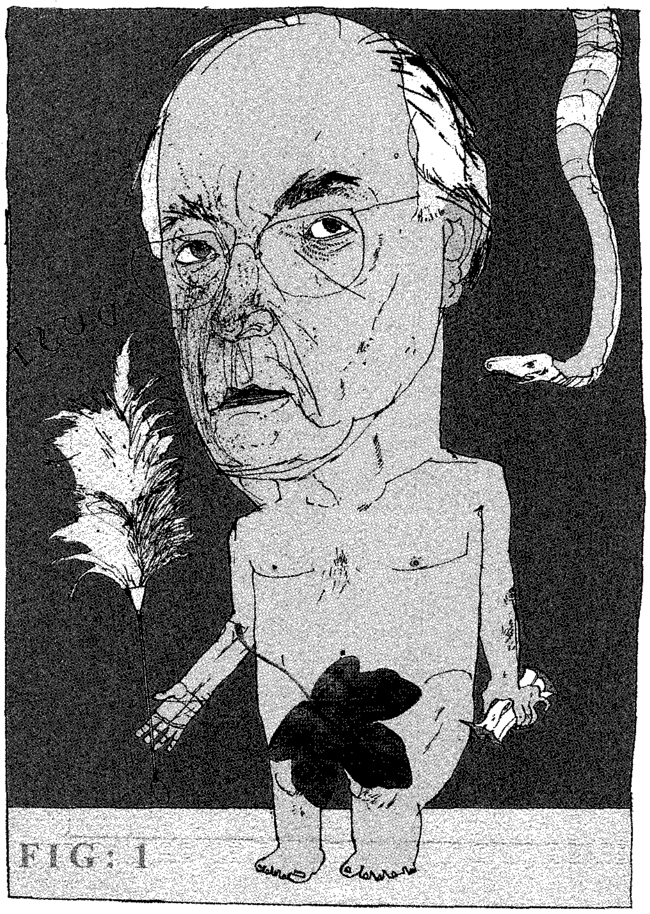
### LIFE AND LETTERS

# FAR FROM NARNIA

*Philip Pullman's secular fantasy for children.*

BY LAURA MILLER

Every year at the University of East Anglia, in Norwich, England, a guest is invited to speak on the subject of religion and education. Sometimes, a prominent bishop is asked to deliver a lecture, but, as a rule, the event isn't exactly a big draw. This year, the auditorium was filled, and another room, with a video feed, had to be set up for those who couldn't fit into the main hall. The speaker, Philip Pullman, is fervently admired for his sophisticated trilogy of children's novels called, collectively, "His Dark Materials." In Britain, his books have sold millions of copies, and his often contentious essays on subjects ranging from censorship to education—"We need to ensure that children are not forced to waste their time on barren rubbish" is a typical declaration—appear regularly in the London papers.



*Pullman's trilogy was inspired by Milton's "Paradise Lost."*

DAVID HUGHES

In some ways, Pullman was a natural choice for the lecture: he was born in Norwich, where his grandfather was an Anglican parish priest, and the university, which is renowned for its creative-writing program, has given him an honorary degree. In his books, fantasy is a springboard for exploring cosmic questions about the purpose of human life and the nature of the universe. Nevertheless, the selection of Pullman was surprising: he is one of England's most outspoken atheists. In the trilogy, a young girl, Lyra Belacqua, becomes enmeshed in an epic struggle against a nefarious Church known as the Magisterium; another character, an ex-nun turned particle physicist named Mary Malone, describes Christianity as "a very powerful and convincing mistake." Pullman once told an interviewer that "every single religion that has a monotheistic god ends up by persecuting other people and killing them because they don't accept him." Peter Hitchens, a conservative British columnist, published an article about Pullman entitled "This Is the Most Dangerous Author in Britain," in which he called him the writer "the atheists would have been praying for, if atheists prayed."

Pullman is a rangy, spirited man in his fifties with a bristling fringe of gray hair; at times, he resembles an intelligent and amused stork. At the lectern, he began, "Quite what prompted you to ask me to talk about religious education I can't immediately see. . . . Given that I've voiced some criticisms of religion in the past, and that various Christian groups have expressed their criticisms of me, it might be that whatever I said on the subject would be hostile in any case." He smiled. "Well, I hope it won't be that. But we shall see." He went on, "I don't profess any religion; I don't think it's possible that there is a God; I have the greatest difficulty in understanding what is meant by the words 'spiritual' or 'spirituality'; but I think I can say something about moral education, and I think it has something to do with the way we understand stories."

Pullman had called his lecture "Miss Goddard's Grave," after a tombstone, first pointed out to him by his mother, in the churchyard in Norwich's old city center. The stone's inscription praises "the Talents and Virtues of SOPHIA ANN GODDARD, who died 25 March 1801 Aged 25. The Former shone with superior Lustre and Effect in the great School of Morals, the THEATRE, while the Latter inform'd the private Circle of Life with Sentiment, Taste, and Manners that still live in the Memory of Friendship and Affection." Who Miss Goddard was Pullman could not say; perhaps he'd look her up one day in the county archives. "There must have been a portrait made at some stage," he speculated. "People have always liked looking at pictures of young actresses; they still do. Perhaps it's still hanging in a house somewhere in the city, or at the back of an antique shop, with the title 'Unknown young woman, late eighteenth century.' There's a story there."

People in the audience had chuckled when Pullman read the line about the theatre being a "School of Morals," but he insisted that the inscription wasn't ironic. In the eighteenth century, he explained, people like Miss Goddard had wisely sought ethical instruction from the theatre and in novels. "We learn from Macbeth's fate that killing is horrible for

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*"It's translated from French, so where it says 'Harvard Business School' it may mean 'jail.'"*

the killer as well as victim," he said, before reading a passage from "Emma," by Jane Austen, in which the heroine is mortified when Mr. Knightley reproaches her for mocking poor, garrulous Miss Bates. The scene, Pullman said, shows that "we can learn what's good and what's bad, what's generous and unselfish, what's cruel and mean, from fiction"; there is no need to consult scripture. As Pullman once put it in a newspaper column, " 'Thou shalt not' might reach the head, but it takes 'Once upon a time' to reach the heart."

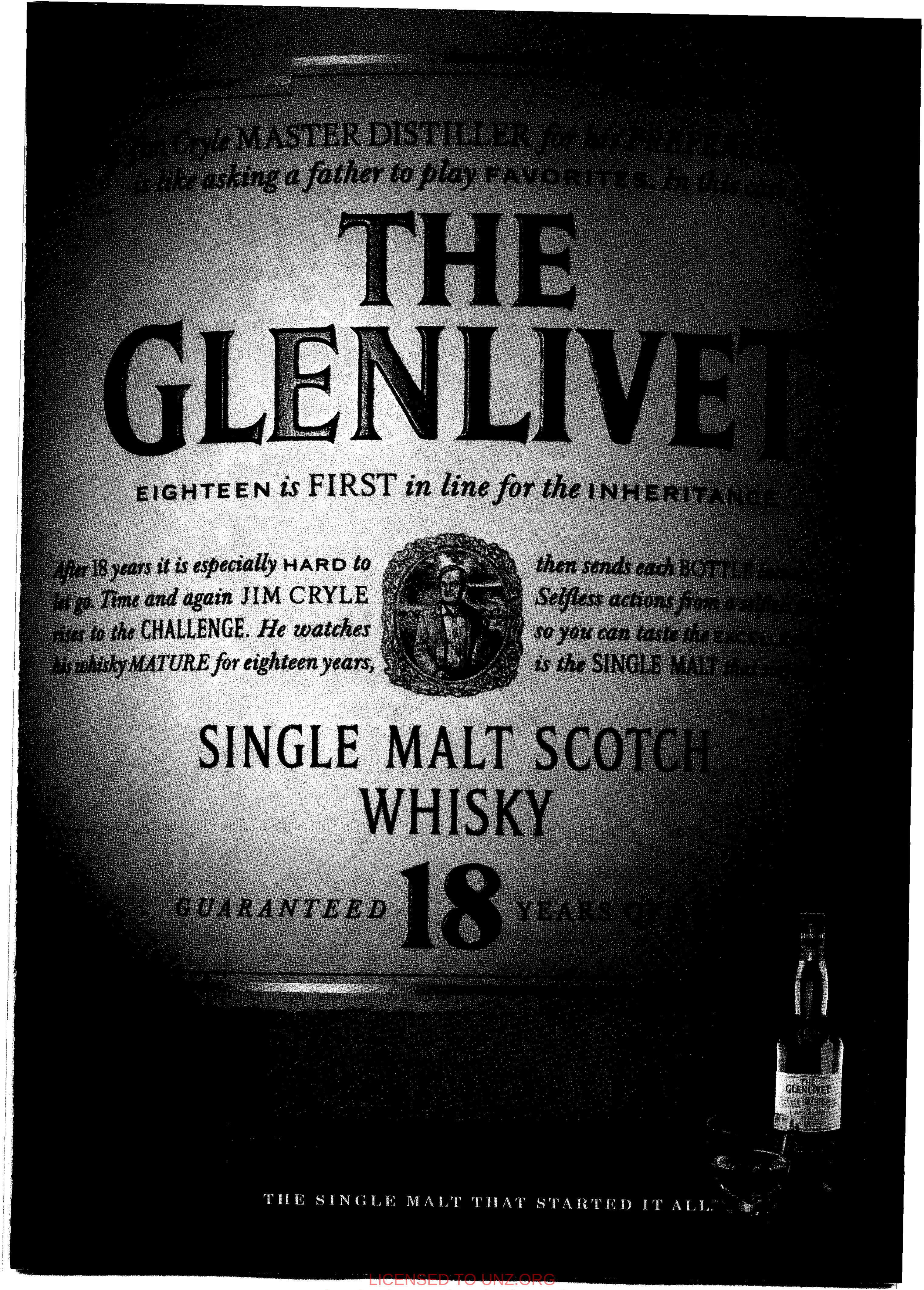
Only a few of the people who had come to see Pullman appeared to be under twenty-one. Strictly speaking, the three novels that make up "His Dark Materials"—"The Golden Compass," "The Subtle Knife," and "The Amber Spyglass"—are children's books, but their ideal reader is a precocious fifteen-year-old who long ago came to find the Harry Potter books intellectually thin. It's possible that as many adults now read the trilogy as do children. Robert McCrum, the literary editor of the *Observer* of London, has celebrated Pullman's "well-made, absorbing characters," "supreme elegance of style and tone," and dexterous handling of "very big ideas." "The Amber Spyglass" won the 2001 Whitbread Prize for best children's book, then went on to win the Whitbread Book of the Year award, too—the first children's book to do so.

In his speech, Pullman contended that the literary School of Morals is inherently ambiguous, dynamic, and democratic: a "conversation." Opposed to this ideal is "theocracy," which he defined as encompassing everything from Khomeini's Iran to explicitly atheistic states such as Stalin's Soviet Union. He listed some characteristics of such states—among them, "a scripture whose word is inerrant," a priesthood whose authority "tends to concentrate in the hands of elderly men," and "a secret police force with the powers of an Inquisition." Theocracies, he said, demonstrate "the tendency of human beings to gather power to themselves in the name of something that may not be questioned."

This impulse toward theocracy, he announced at the end of his speech, "will defeat the School of Morals in the end." He sounded oddly cheerful making this prediction; in his books, Pullman enjoys striking a tone of melancholy resolve. He continued, "But that doesn't mean we should give up and surrender. . . . I think we should act *as if*. I think we should read books, and tell children stories, and take them to the theatre, and learn poems, and play music, as if it would make a difference. . . . We should act as if the universe were listening to us and responding. We should act as if life were going to win. . . . That's what I think they do, in the School of Morals. And Miss Goddard's portrait hangs on the classroom wall."

The following morning, I joined Pullman as he stopped by the Norwich branch of Ottakar's, a British bookstore chain. We slipped into a tiny, windowless back room, so he could sign a cartload of books. As he scribbled his name on the title pages, one of the store's employees explained that Pullman's public signings are complicated productions. "When 'The Amber Spyglass' came out, we had to hire a hall," he told me. "More than nine hundred people showed up." Pullman's fame is only likely to grow: New Line Cinema, the studio responsible for the "Lord of the Rings" films, is preparing three movies based on the trilogy.

Twenty minutes later, we left Ottakar's and got into his car and drove along a bewildering web of country roads toward Oxford; he lives in a suburb of the city with his wife, Jude. (They have two sons, both grown; Jamie is a violist for the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra, and Tom recently received a master's degree in linguistics from Cambridge.) It was a raw, wet day. Conversing from behind the wheel suited Pullman; it allowed him free use of a favorite mannerism—a sly, avuncular sidewise glance that punctuates his wit. Outside Norwich, a huge pillar, topped by an ovoid urn, suddenly came into view, in a field by the side of the road. "See that?" Pullman asked with great enthusiasm. "It's the memorial to the first pineapple ever brought into East Anglia!" When I raised an eyebrow, he chuckled; in fact, the pillar was a First World War memorial. This quip, he said later, was borrowed from his grandfather the clergyman; the monument was a landmark of Pullman's childhood. "He filled the landscape with stories," Pullman said of his grandfather. "We'd go for a walk and he'd say, 'See that tree, boys? That's Robin Hood's tree. He would hide up there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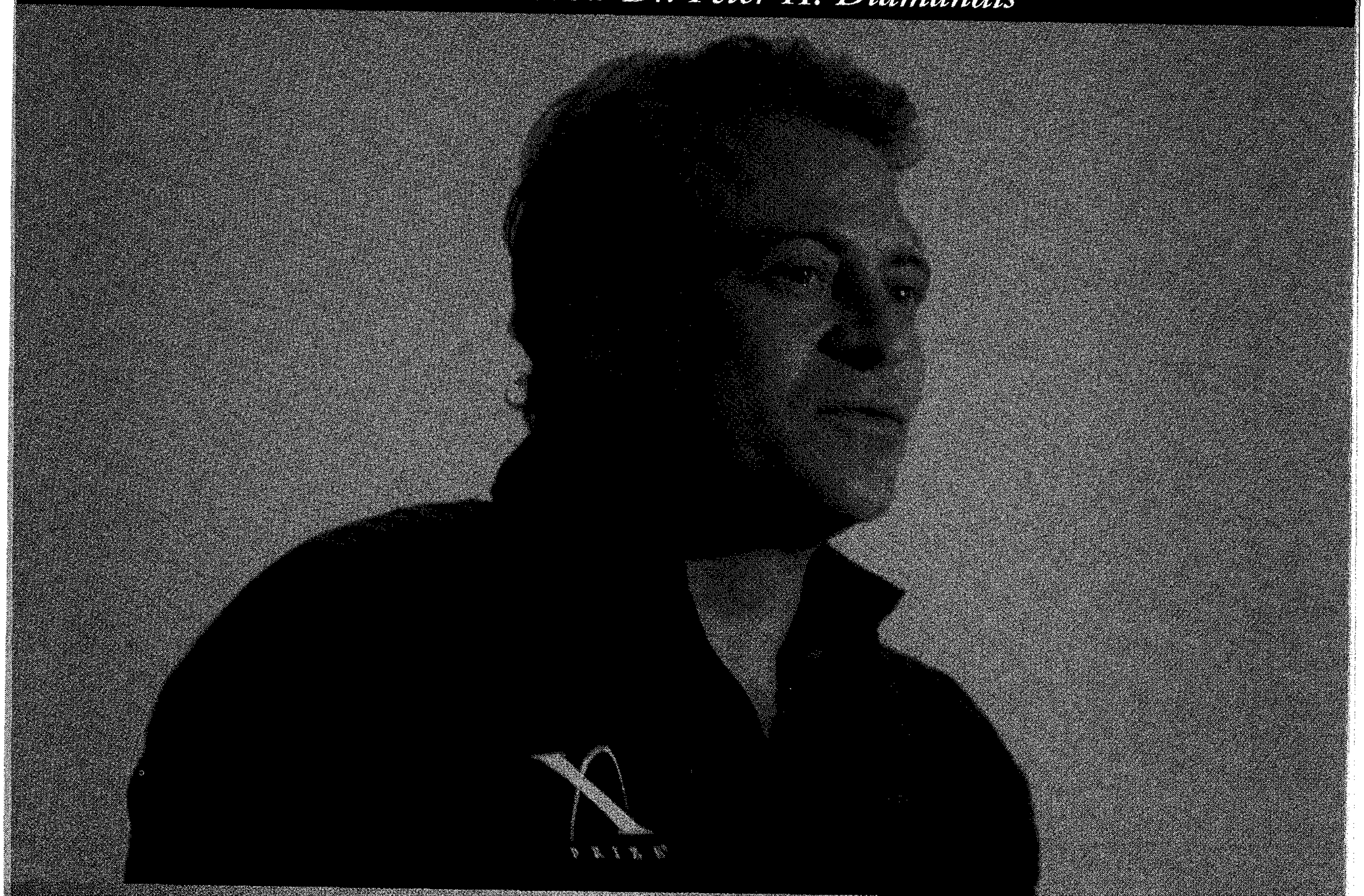
# THE ORIGINATORS

## THE X FACTOR *Dr. Peter H. Diamandis*



"I WANT TO ENCOURAGE EVERYONE TO DREAM," says Dr. Peter H. Diamandis. His personal wish has global implications. As the founder and chairman of the X PRIZE Foundation, he has fostered a new age in philanthropy and, as the Foundation's first order of business, opened the heavens for private space travel.

On October 4, 2004, the X PRIZE Foundation awarded its inaugural cash prize of ten million dollars for the first private manned space flight in history. As thrilling as this one achievement is, what it represents is still more awesome: of the twenty-six teams that entered the recent competition, a dozen continue today to pursue the dream of space travel. The competition may be over, but an industry has been born. Peter anticipates that at least five different carriers will offer space travel to the public by 2010.

By tapping into the inherent human thirst for competition and offering a significant cash prize, the X PRIZE Foundation causes the best human minds to focus on a well-defined problem. The approach efficiently attracts traditional entrepreneurs and maverick thinkers alike. "We leveraged one million dollars in seed money to raise the funds for the ten million dollar prize. In turn, the teams invested $100 million in their projects," Peter explains. "Competitions create a remarkable incentive for confronting every challenge facing mankind."

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when the Sheriff would come along!' "

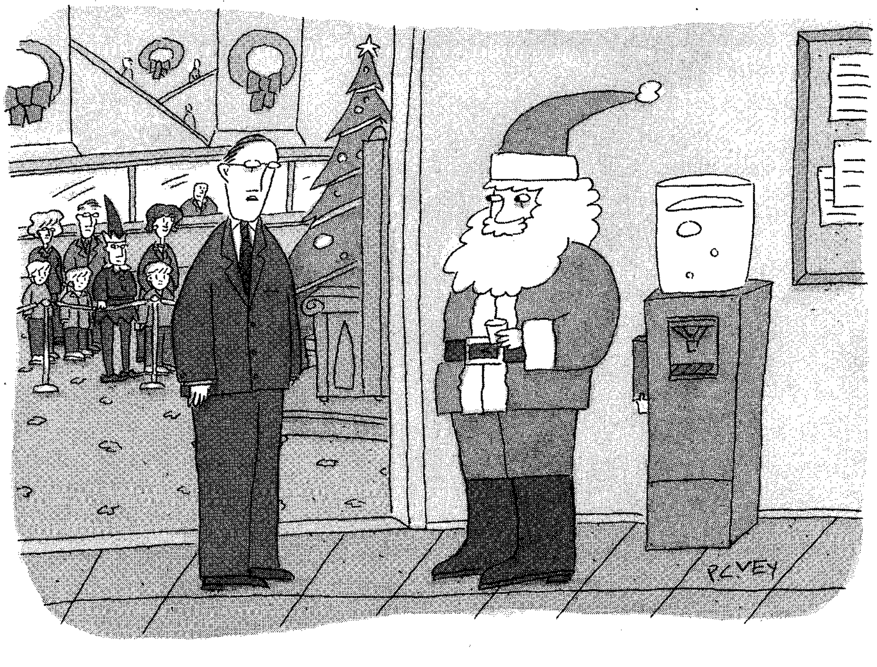
Pullman's first stories for children, which he published in the nineteen-eighties, were fanciful entertainments. He still dashes off these fairy tales: his most recent work in this vein, "The Scarecrow and His Servant," is the picaresque story of a gallant farmyard mannequin who comes to life and the orphaned boy who signs on as his Sancho Panza. (The scarecrow's courtship of a farmer's broom is comically chivalrous.) For many years, Pullman supplemented his writing income by teaching literature at a middle school and at Westminster College, both in Oxford, and he retains some of the traits common in favorite teachers: a sartorial trademark (red socks) and a good-natured gruffness, calibrated to let the charming students know that they won't be indulged but not so harsh as to scare the timid ones.

In the early nineteen-nineties, Pullman told me, he decided that he was ready to write something "large." He informed his editor, David Fickling, who was then at Scholastic and is now affiliated with Random House, that he had in mind a very long story that would take three books to tell. The inspiration was a work Pullman has loved since his teens: "Paradise Lost." (The series takes its title from a line of the poem which describes the raw substance that Milton's "almighty maker" uses to create life.) Initially, Pullman told me, he simply planned to infuse his story with Miltonian atmosphere—"the grandeur, the nobility, the overwhelming magnitude of ambition and imaginative power." Soon, however, Milton's theme, the Fall of Man, crept into the novel. In an introduction to a recent edition of "Paradise Lost," Pullman writes, "My story resolved itself into an account of the necessity of growing up, and a refusal to lament the loss of innocence."

Pullman's heroine, Lyra Belacqua, is a pre-adolescent girl who erroneously believes that she is an orphan. She has been raised in a slapdash fashion at Oxford, by the scholars and staff of the venerable (and fictional) Jordan College. The novels are set in an alternate version of this universe, in which people travel by zeppelin and refer to electricity as "anbaric power." It is a church-burdened world, in which the Reformation led to consolidation, not schism, and the Papacy was moved from Rome to Geneva by John Calvin. This Church is responsible for the kidnapping of Lyra's best friend, whom she vows to rescue; the exile of her father, whom she sets out to find; and, eventually, the homicidal pursuit of Lyra herself. In "His Dark Materials," the Church is run by a cabal of celibate men who are obsessed with sin and its eradication. The Church employs torture and a doctrine of "preëmptive penance"—a program of self-flagellation that provides its adherents with a kind of get-out-of-Hell-free card, forgiving them in advance for such politically useful sins as assassination.

This villainous institutional portrait, it should be said, is not derived from personal experience. Pullman's initial encounters with religion were largely benign, owing to his beloved grandfather. Although he became a skeptic early on—"for all the usual reasons"—he kept his thoughts to himself. "I didn't want to upset him," he said of his grandfather. "I knew I wouldn't have changed his mind." And, for Pullman, his grandfather's most important quality was his "big soul." He added, "Although I call myself an atheist, I am a Church of England atheist, and a 1662 Book of Common Prayer atheist, because that's the tradition I was brought up in and I cannot escape those early influences." In "His Dark Materials," Pullman's criticisms of organized religion come across as anti-authoritarian and anti-ascetic rather than anti-doctrinal. (Jesus isn't mentioned in any of the books, although Pullman has hinted that He might figure in a forthcoming sequel, "The Book of Dust.") His fundamental objection is to ideological tyranny and the rejection of this world in favor of an idealized afterlife, regardless of creed. As one of the novel's pagan characters puts it, "Every church is the same: control, destroy, obliterate every good feeling."

"His Dark Materials" may be the first fantasy series founded upon the ideals of the Enlightenment rather than upon tribal and mythic yearnings for kings, gods, and supermen. Pullman's heroes are explorers, cowboys, and physicists. The series offers an extended celebration of the marvels of science: discoveries and theories from the outer reaches of cosmology—about dark matter and the possible existence of multiple universes—are threaded into the story. Indeed, the central mystery of "His Dark Materials" concerns the nature of Dust, a dark matter-like substance that the scientists of Lyra's world have only recently learned how to detect. Dust is everywhere, but it tends to concentrate around human beings, and around adults more than children. The Church considers Dust to be the "physical evidence for original sin." Lyra's



*"Will you only promise the children toys that can be bought at this store?"*

father, a Byronic figure named Lord Asriel, defies Church prohibitions by mounting an expedition to the Arctic Circle, where he learns more about Dust by observing another universe, which can be glimpsed through the northern lights. Her mother, the treacherous Mrs. Coulter, is secretly running an isolated camp in the same region, where she conducts sinister Dust-related experiments on abducted children, under the aegis of the General Oblation Board, one of the Church's more malevolent offshoots. It is this outfit that kidnaps Lyra's best friend, setting the story in motion.

What readers tend to find most alluring about "His Dark Materials," however, is a wholly unscientific invention. Every character in Lyra's world has a daemon—an animal-shaped alter ego that is all but inseparable from its human counterpart. Not that the relationship is always congenial. In the first scene in "The Golden Compass," Lyra quarrels with her daemon, Pantalaimon, about breaking the college rules, much as characters in more conventional stories might argue with their consciences. The device could be gimmicky, but Pullman wields it with elegant metaphorical economy. Not only do daemons answer the writer's need to turn a character's internal struggles into drama; they speak to the ache of consciousness and the desire for an ideal companion. Children, owing to the plasticity of their personalities, have daemons that can change shape—in the opening scene, Pantalaimon transforms from a moth into an ermine—but as a person comes of age his daemon settles on a single form that reflects his essence. In Pullman's version of the Fall of Man, the loss of a protean innocence leads to a gain in self-knowledge.

In 1953, when Pullman was seven, he was "thrilled" by the news that he and his four-year-old brother, Francis, were "almost orphans." His father, an R.A.F. aviator, had died when the plane he was piloting crashed in Africa. The boys had seen so little of their father that he wasn't quite real to them; Philip remembers him only vaguely, as a paragon of masculine "glamour." Like Lyra's own neglectful father, he was "powerful and dashing," as well as charmingly irresponsible. He once gave Philip a pack of cigarettes, hoping that they'd make the boy sick and stop him from begging for singles. (It didn't work.)

Pullman told me that his mother, Audrey, was considered "difficult" by her family. "She'd suddenly shut off affection," he recalls. After his father died, she lodged Philip and Francis with her parents in Norwich for a year or so, and went to London to work. She rented a little flat in Chelsea and ran with a crowd that dazzled young Philip: "men with pipes and cravats and sports cars." This milieu turns up in an exalted form in "The Golden Compass," when the beautiful Mrs. Coulter, who exudes "a scent of grownupness, something disturbing but enticing," brings Lyra to live with her in her chic London apartment.

Pullman's mother eventually married another R.A.F. pilot. The family followed him on assignment to Australia, then finally to Llanbedr, a small town in North Wales. By then, Philip and Francis had a half brother; a half sister soon followed. Later, their stepfather's son from an earlier marriage came to live with them. This hodgepodge of half siblings and stepsiblings remains close, despite having since scattered over three continents. When Pullman's stepfather died, in 2002 (his mother died a decade earlier), they weren't all able to gather immediately for a service, so they arranged to meet in Scotland the following May. Pullman hit upon the idea of shooting his stepfather's ashes into the sky with fireworks. "The whole family went out to this little rocky headland, where the firework-maker had his place, overlooking the Firth of Forth," he said. "As night fell, we'd all been drinking whiskey, having a good time." His voice slid into a lilting whisper as he sketched the scene. "There were seals basking on the shore, the lights of Edinburgh were just coming out, and there were big naval vessels maneuvering in the firth. The firework-maker, this amazing guy, was busy fixing all the fuses and wires. My stepbrother gave a little address, perfectly judged, and my sister lit the fuse. And it was the most wonderful display! The sky was full of stars—a brilliant display. My sister's little daughter said, 'That's the way I want to go!'"

One of Pullman's beliefs is that your life begins when you are born, but your life story begins when you realize that you were delivered into the wrong family by mistake. "We were a military family," Mark Dodgson, his half brother, told me. "We weren't a great one for talking about ideas. Philip was completely different." For a while, Pullman's stepfather kept a chicken farm in Llanbedr. "Phil used to spend hours and hours and hours cleaning out these damn chickens," Dodgson recalled. "As soon as he was finished . . . the others would go off marching or something, and he'd stick his head in a book."

Pullman found intellectual companionship at the local school. The acknowledgments of "The Amber Spyglass" offer thanks to Enid Jones, his secondary-school English teacher, for introducing him to "Paradise Lost" and for "the best that education can give, the notion that responsibility and delight can coexist." (Miss Jones is still alive, and Pullman keeps in touch with her; he also keeps a bottle of apricot brandy she gave him stashed in his car, for emergencies.) His best friend during his teens was Merfyn Jones—no relation to Enid, but another devotee of her approach to Milton and the Romantic poets. He is now the BBC national governor for Wales. Jones told me that they shared "a kind of heretical predisposition."

In his teens, Pullman discovered the poetry of William Blake, another great influence on "His Dark Materials." He used to jot down lines that he'd memorized from "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" and pass them to Merfyn during class. Pullman subscribes to Blake's view of Milton as being "of the Devil's party without knowing it." He explained, "All of the imaginative sympathy of the poem is with Satan rather than with God."

Jones has a defining memory of Pullman from their final year in school. The boys represented their school in a debate against a team from the local private girls' school. "We basically were defending anarchy," Jones recalled. "People couldn't quite believe what we were saying and that we were saying it in quite

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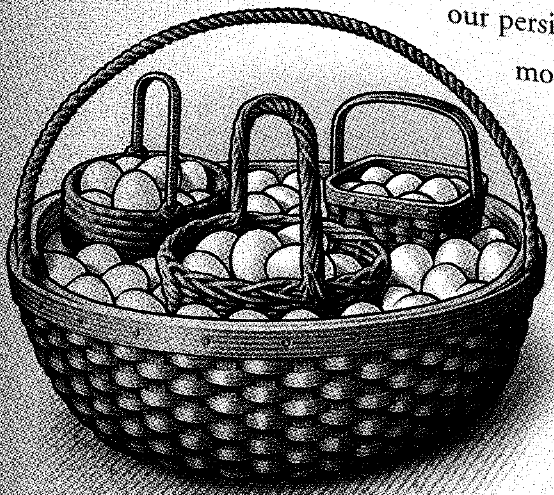

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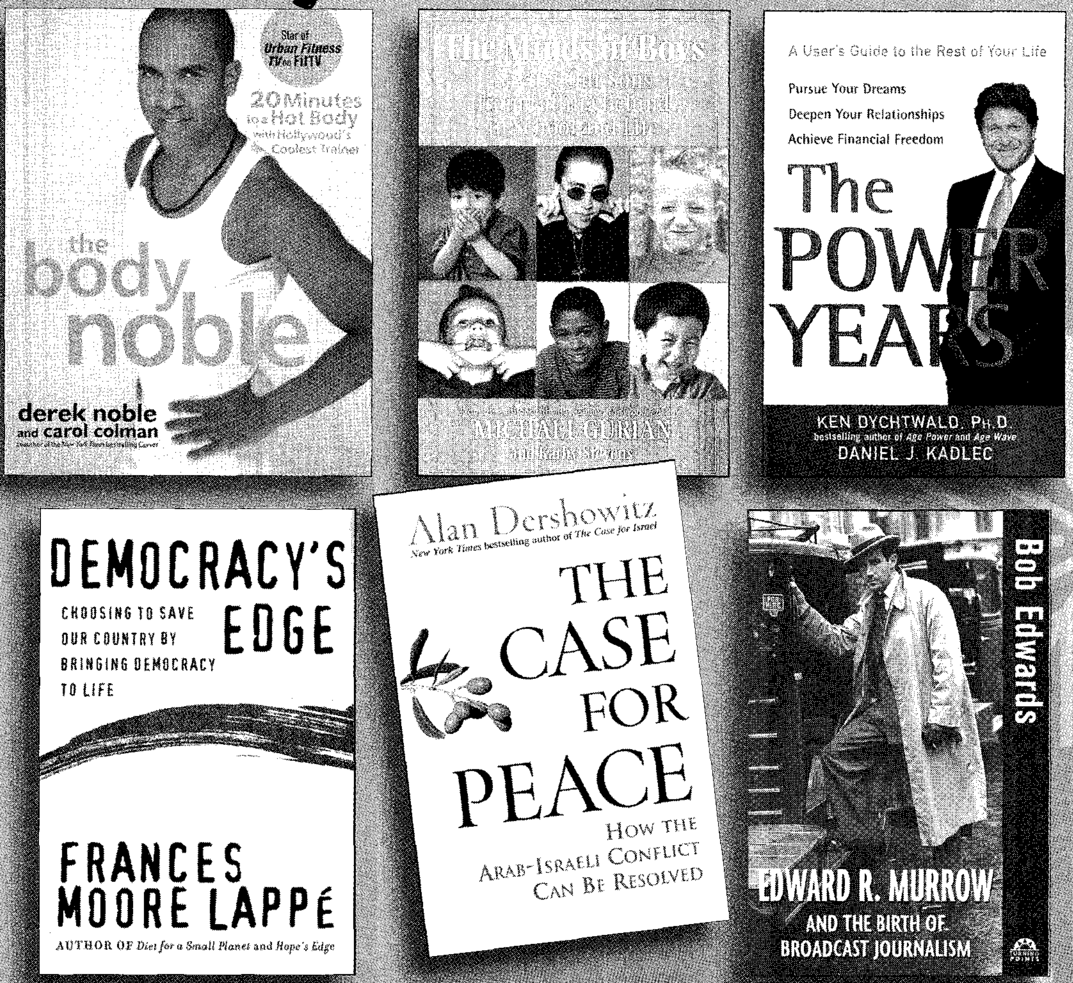
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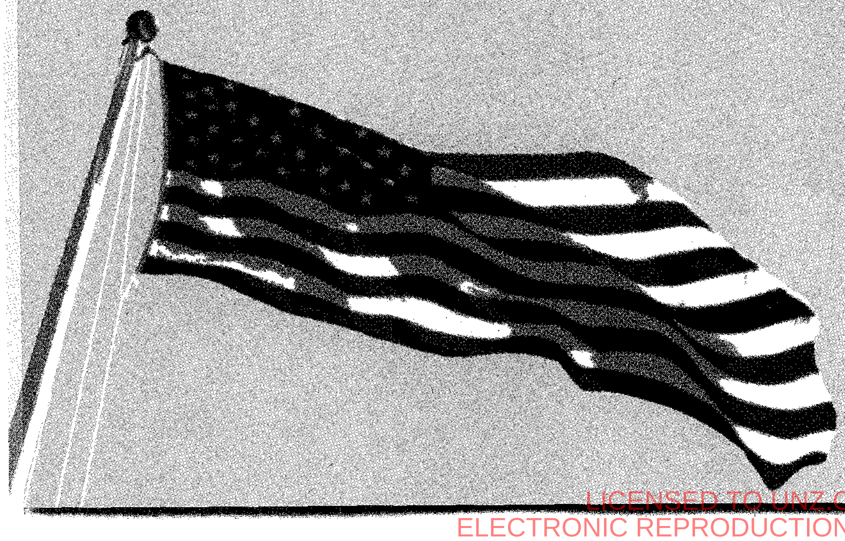

this way and that and that we were using quotes from various poets and politicians." Afterward, Jones said, some girls from the other school came up to the teen-age firebrands and asked, "How are you allowed to say these things? We're not even allowed to think about thinking about these things!"

Near the end of "The Golden Compass," Lord Asriel asks Lyra to bring him a copy of the Bible, and he reads her a passage from Genesis. In Lyra's world, the Bible isn't quite the same as ours: when Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit, the first thing they see is the adult form of their daemons. "But it en't *true*, is it?" Lyra asks of the story. "Not true like chemistry or engineering, not that kind of true? There wasn't *really* an Adam and Eve?" Lord Asriel tells her to think of the story as an "imaginary number, like the square root of minus one." Its truth might not be tangible, but you can use it to calculate "all manner of things that couldn't be imagined without it." The metaphor is not just cunning; it helps explain why Pullman, a champion of science, writes in the fantastic mode.

The city of Oxford, Pullman once wrote, fosters the imagination: "I put it down to the mists from the river, which have a solvent effect on reality." Reality, it must be said, seemed firmly in place as we made our way into town, passing through a prosaic neighborhood of contemporary homes, where Pullman once lived. He pointed out a row of hornbeam trees. "Those are the trees from 'The Subtle Knife,' " he announced. The second novel in the series opens in the Oxford of this world; a boy, Will Parry, is trying to protect himself and his mother from strange men who have been badgering them for information about Will's missing father. In a moment of despair, near this row of hornbeam trees along an otherwise unremarkable traffic corridor, Will discovers a hole in the fabric of the universe. He slips through it and into the sanctuary of another universe, where he meets and befriends Lyra Belacqua.

In 1965, Pullman became the first student from his Welsh school to go to Oxford. The first time he visited the town, he was bewitched by the sensation it offered of stepping out of time. A scene from "The Subtle Knife" takes place near the Radcliffe Camera, which Pullman describes as "a round building with a great leaden dome, set in a square bounded by honey-colored stone college buildings and a church and wide-crowned trees above high garden walls. The afternoon sun drew the warmest tones out of it all, and the air felt rich with it, almost the color itself of heavy golden wine." When Lyra wants to escape from her minders, she clambers onto the roof of Jordan College. As a student, Pullman used to sneak onto the roof of his college, Exeter.

Pullman and his wife moved outside town a few years ago, when the admirers who kept turning up at their door, asking for autographs and taking photos, became a nuisance. Other Oxford sites have attracted "His Dark Materials" pilgrims, too, particularly the Botanic Garden, where the story's final, wrenching scene is set. Pullman and I stopped there during a walk around the city. "Once, I saw something on one of the benches," Pullman said. "It turned out to be a little wooden heart with 'For Will and Lyra' written on it. Isn't that nice?"

We wandered over to the courtyard of the Bodleian Library and stared up at its imposing inner walls. Pullman, whose performance at Oxford was, by his own reckoning, undistinguished, said that he rarely visited the library as a student. "It was intimidating," he said. "It's a place of strict rules and arcane ceremonies. Now that I'm featured in the catalogue, I'm not so scared anymore." He pointed at the gray flagstones on the floor and said, "Under each of these stones we're stepping on are hundreds of books." In an essay about Oxford that was published in the *Guardian*, he wrote that he and his friends used to tell creepy stories about the lowest levels of the library's underground stacks. They were said to be "occupied by a race of sub-human creatures. . . . You could hear them howling and scrabbling if you pressed your ear to the cellar wall under staircase 9. I did, and you can." In the trilogy, the Bodleian's caverns become the haunted catacombs of Jordan College, where Lyra plays with a wild gang of servants' kids.

Oxford has inspired a disproportionate amount of children's literature. Trying to glimpse one of the many velvety green quads through gateways that are

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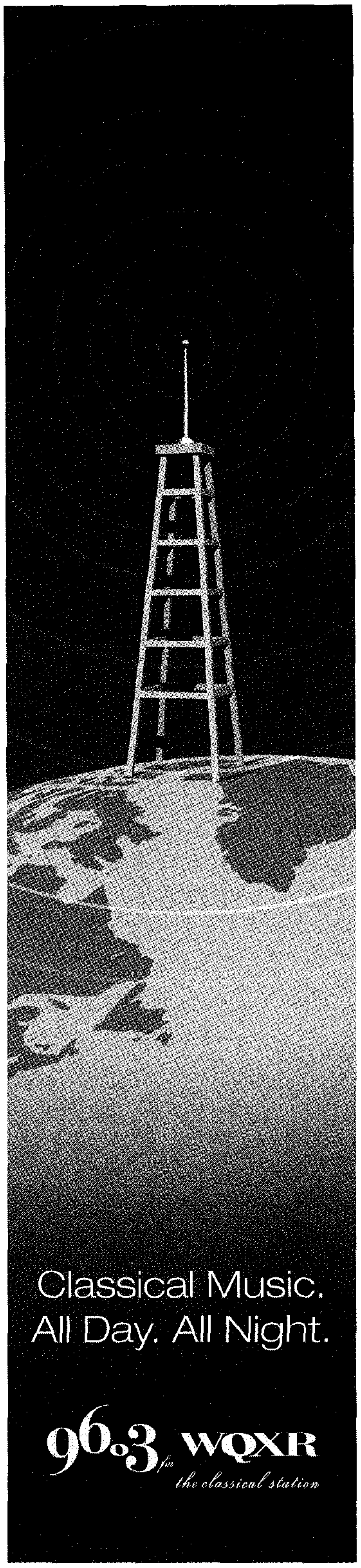
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frequently blocked by large signs declaring "The College is CLOSED" can make you feel like Alice peering at that beautiful garden through the doorway she's too big to enter. The grounds circled by Addison's Walk, near Magdalen College, where C. S. Lewis taught, have the air of a park aspiring to wilderness, like Lewis's imaginary land of Narnia. But perhaps the main reason that Oxford's dons have excelled at writing for children is that, for so long, the university dictated that they live like children: sheltered, celibate, in single-sex institutions, waited upon by indulgent servants.

Pullman loves Oxford, but he's far from donnish. His books have been likened to those of J. R. R. Tolkien, another alumnus, but he scoffs at the notion of any resemblance. " 'The Lord of the Rings' is fundamentally an infantile work," he said. "Tolkien is not interested in the way grownup, adult human beings interact with each other. He's interested in maps and plans and languages and codes." When it comes to "The Chronicles of Narnia," by C. S. Lewis, Pullman's antipathy is even more pronounced. Although he likes Lewis's criticism and quotes it surprisingly often, he considers the fantasy series "morally loathsome." In a 1998 essay for the *Guardian,* entitled "The Dark Side of Narnia," he condemned "the misogyny, the racism, the sado-masochistic relish for violence that permeates the whole cycle." He reviled Lewis for depicting the character Susan Pevensie's sexual coming of age—suggested by her interest in "nylons and lipstick and invitations"—as grounds for exclusion from paradise. In Pullman's view, the "Chronicles," which end with the rest of the family's ascension to a neo-Platonic version of Narnia after they die in a railway accident, teach that "death is better than life; boys are better than girls . . . and so on. There is no shortage of such nauseating drivel in Narnia, if you can face it."

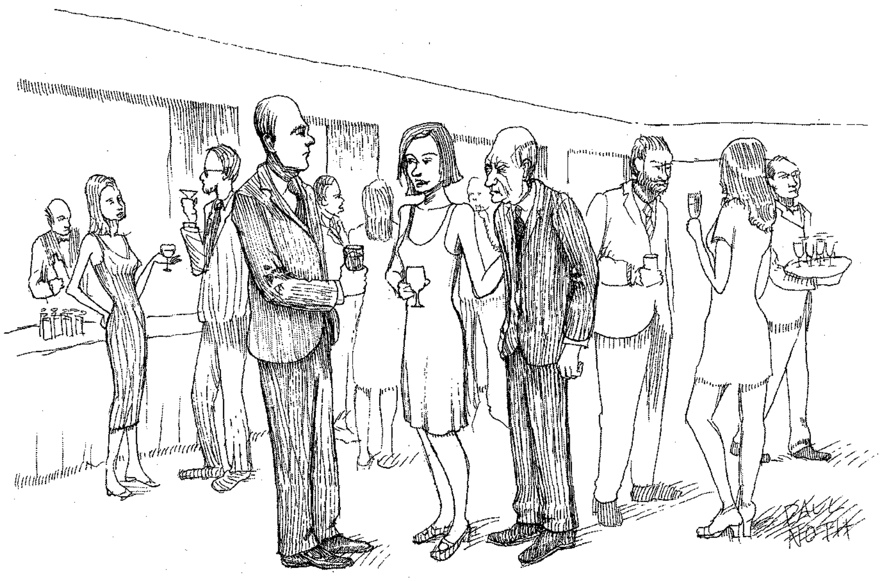
Pullman also makes the argument that Lewis really isn't all that Christian. The fate of Susan Pevensie, he told me, indicates "some sort of crazed, deranged Manichaeism. Here's a simple test: What is the greatest Christian virtue? Well, it's charity, isn't it? It's love. If somebody who knew nothing about Christian doctrine, and who had been told that Lewis was a great Christian teacher, read all the way through those books, would he get that message? No."

Sexual love, regarded with apprehension in Lewis's fiction and largely ignored in Tolkien's, saves the world in "His Dark Materials," when Lyra's coming of age and falling in love mystically bring about the mending of a perilous cosmological rift. "The idea of keeping childhood alive forever and ever and regretting the passage into adulthood—whether it's a gentle, rose-tinged regret or a passionate, full-blooded hatred, as it is in Lewis—is simply wrong," Pullman told me. As a child, Lyra is able to read a complicated divination device, called an alethiometer, with an instinctual ease. As she grows up, she becomes self-conscious and loses that grace, but she's told that she can regain the skill with years of practice, and eventually become even better at it. "That's a truer picture of what it's like to be a human being," Pullman said. "And a more hopeful one. . . . We are bound to grow up."

At one point, Pullman and I stopped by the Eagle and Child, an Oxford pub where Lewis and Tolkien used to meet regularly with a group of literary friends. (They called themselves the Inklings.) A framed photograph of Lewis's jowly face smiled down on us as we talked. In person, Pullman isn't quite as choleric as he sometimes comes across in his newspaper essays. When challenged, he listens carefully and considerately, and occasionally tempers his ire. "The 'Narnia' books are a real wrestle with real things," he conceded. As much as he dislikes the answers Lewis arrives at, he said that he respects "the struggle that he's undergoing as he searches for the answers. There's hope for Lewis. Lewis could be redeemed." Not Tolkien, however: the "Rings" series, he declared, is "just fancy spun candy. There's no substance to it."

Pullman's appreciation for moral seriousness in fiction has made him deeply frustrated with adult contemporary literature. When "The Golden Compass" won the 1995 Carnegie Medal, a prize awarded by British librarians to the year's best children's book, he gave a speech in which he proclaimed, "There are some themes, some subjects, too large for adult fiction; they can only be dealt with adequately in a children's book." He explained, "In adult literary fiction, stories are there on sufferance. Other things are felt to be more important: technique, style, literary knowingness. . . . The present-day would-be George Eliots take up their stories as if with a pair of tongs. They're embarrassed by them. If they could write novels without stories in them, they would. Sometimes they do."

The newspapers, and pretty much anyone who'd ever given up on a contemporary literary novel, relished Pullman's provocation. David Fickling, Pullman's editor, recalled, "That was

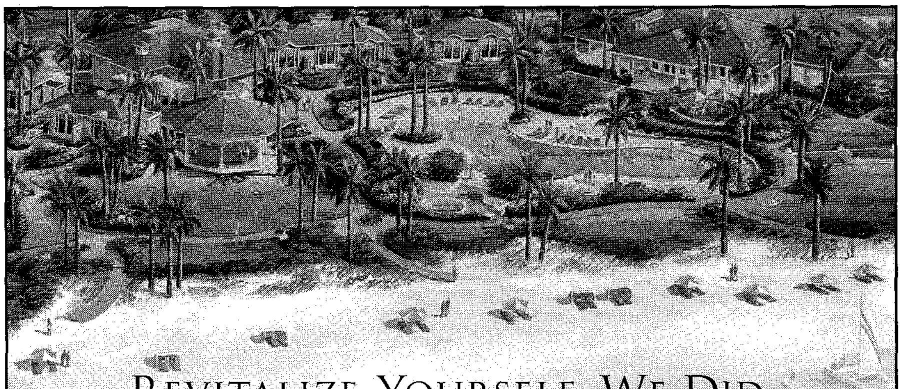


*"Mr. Stephenson is the subject of a widely anticipated obituary."*

the first really big public demonstration of Philip's authoritativeness. A clear statement about stories and their importance to children and their importance to human beings was made." In fact, Pullman's first two published novels, which he wrote in his twenties, were for adults, but he regards them as substandard and has turned down offers to reissue the second, "Galatea." (The first is so bad, he insists, that he refuses even to speak of it.) In writing for children, he discovered, he felt liberated to pursue the elemental pleasures of story.

In "His Dark Materials," Mary Malone, the physicist, discovers that dark matter consists of elementary particles of consciousness. Dust is, as another character puts it, "a name for what happens when matter begins to understand itself." You could say that, for Pullman, stories are the elementary particles of meaning, without which we'd be less than fully human. In his Carnegie Medal speech, he said, "We need stories so much that we're even willing to read bad books to get them, if the good books won't supply them. We all need stories, but children are more frank about it." What angers Pullman most about theocracy, in the end, is that it blinds people to the true purpose of narrative. Fundamentalists don't know how to read stories—including those in the Bible—metaphorically, as if they were Lord Asriel's imaginary numbers.

Pullman refined his own storytelling gifts orally, by recounting versions of the Iliad and the Odyssey to his middle-school students. He estimates that he's told each epic at least thirty times. Indeed, he once caused a scene in a restaurant when he was retelling the Odyssey to his son Tom, then about five years old. "Every time we went out to dinner, I'd tell it to him in serialized form while we waited for our food to come," he said. "I'd just gotten to the part where Odysseus has come back home in disguise as an old beggar. Penelope has taken Odysseus's old bow down and told the suitors that she'll marry whoever can string it. They all try, but none of them can do it. Then Odysseus picks it up, and he feels it all over—to make sure it's still good, which it is—and then in one move he strings it. Of course, we



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know what’s going to happen next—he’s going to use it to kill the suitors—but just before that he plucks it just once, to hear the tone. Tom was so taken with the tension of the moment that he bit a piece out of his water glass. The waitress, who was coming toward us with our food, saw him do it, and she was so startled that she dropped her tray. There was food everywhere! It was chaos.”

Pullman polished his sense of plot by writing plays for school productions. The need to leave the audience hungry for what happens next instilled in him, he said, a ruthless discipline. Nicholas Wright, a playwright who, in 2003, adapted “His Dark Materials” into a hit play for the National Theatre, in London, told me that Pullman encouraged him to edit the narrative at will to make it as effective as possible on stage. “He’s quite a showman,” Wright said. “His instinct was always that the play could be better if you forgot this or did that.” Pinned up by Pullman’s desk is a list of the film director Billy Wilder’s rules for writers. Rule No. 1 is “Grab ’em by the throat and never let ’em go.”

“His Dark Materials” does exactly that. Though the trilogy is more than a thousand pages long, it is powered by an enormous engine of story, which is not merely plot; it’s the sensation some narratives give us of being caught up in something at once momentous and personal. “His Dark Materials” is the story of a universe in peril, but it is also the tale of a girl growing up; the two are inextricable. Wright said of the series, “What it reminded me of more than anything else, funnily enough, is Wagner. Wotan and Fricka are having a terrible fight, and they’re on a mountaintop, and she’s arriving on a chariot drawn by rams. . . . But at the same time, you think, Hang on, isn’t this also Wagner and his wife in a Victorian living room, having a row about the fact that he’s having an affair with the maid? It exists on this very big mythic level, but it’s not divorced from reality.”

Great storytelling is an alchemy of voice, tone, and point of view. Pullman is a partisan of the third-person omniscient narrator, which he thinks of as a character in itself—a disembodied “sprite.” This ringmaster of many a nineteenth-century novel can, as he told me, “go anywhere and do anything and see anything, and is both male and female, both old and young, wise and foolish, cynical and credulous, all these contradictory things at once. The narrating voice that tells ‘Middlemarch’ is just as much a made-up character as Dorothea or Mr. Casaubon.”

Pullman said that it was only after he’d learned to inhabit this voice that he became a good novelist. David Fickling coached him on the obscure but merciless rules by which stories operate when he urged Pullman to kill off a major character at the end of one of his early books, “The Shadow in the North,” instead of leaving him merely injured. Pullman now refers to this imperative as “the ‘Fred must die’ rule.” The mournful ending of “His Dark Materials” wrings protests from some readers, but as Pullman once told an interviewer, “I am the servant of the story.” He added, “The story made me do it. That was what had to happen. If I’d denied it, the story wouldn’t have had a tenth of its power.”

The day we sat down at the Eagle and Child, Pullman told me about a speech he had delivered in May, 2004, at a colloquium on science, literature, and human nature. In the speech, he speculated on the possible origins of this “very clear and strong” sense he has that there is, inherently, “a right shape and a wrong shape” for any given story. Where do these shapes come from, and how can he recognize them with such certainty? Not surprisingly, Pullman rejects the notion that he’s receiving direction from some “higher power” when he apprehends that the story he’s working on is either whole or broken. His certainty might be a sophisticated form of cultural conditioning, he supposes, or simply the gift of experience. Because Pullman is an admirer of “The Language Instinct,” the book by the evolutionary psychologist Steven Pinker, I suggested that, if linguistic grammar is hardwired, perhaps a grammar of narrative is, too. “I don’t think that’s implausible, but we just don’t know,” he said. He didn’t sound as if he particularly wanted to find out, either.

One afternoon, at the converted seventeenth-century farmhouse where Pullman and his wife live, he put a frying pan on the big cast-iron Aga stove and fried some organic bacon, which we had purchased at the old covered market in Oxford. (In the trilogy, Pullman reminded me, Lyra spends a lot of time in the market with her gang, running around underfoot, stealing apples.) In the couple's previous house, Pullman wrote in a shed at the bottom of the garden. Here he has a book-lined study with plenty of room for an impressive wooden rocking horse that Pullman, who likes to do carpentry, was hand-carving for his two grandchildren. He's also an amateur meteorologist; in the back yard is a small weather station that sends readings on temperature, humidity, barometric pressure, wind velocity, and ultraviolet radiation into his laptop computer, via a wireless feed.

Pullman tipped the bacon into some split-pea soup that he had made earlier, and we sat down for lunch at a big wooden farm table, with Jude, a dark-haired woman with a deadpan sense of humor. A former teacher, she also worked for a few years as a hypnotherapist. She gave the latter profession up, she said, when she "got embarrassed opening the door to strange men and asking them to come upstairs." When Pullman left for a moment to check the mail, Jude gravely explained that one of their two pug dogs, Nell, had been given her name because "she carries on like Nell Gwyn"—the merry whore of seventeenth-century London.

A few minutes later, Pullman came bounding back into the kitchen, waving a letter. It had arrived at his door despite the fact that the correspondent didn't know the street address. He was beaming. The envelope read "Philip Pullman, The Storyteller, Oxford." "I couldn't ask for anything better," he said. ♦

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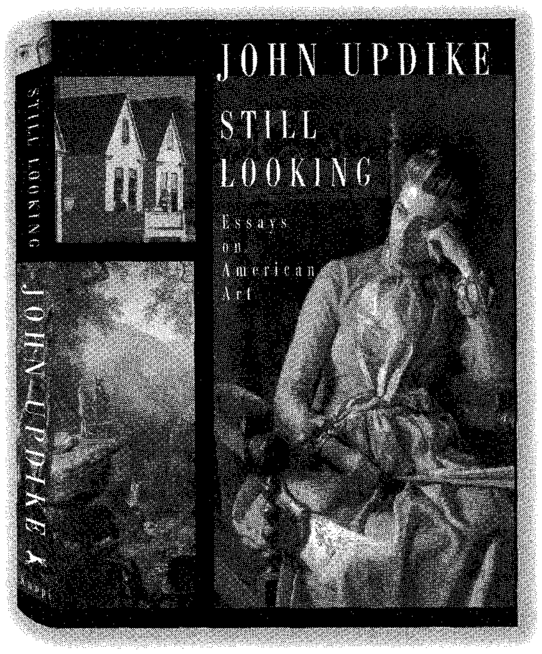
John Updike on American art



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FICTION

# THE WORD

## BY VLADIMIR NABOKOV

*The author in 1925, two years after "The Word" was first published in Russian.*

ESTATE OF VLADIMIR NABOKOV

Swept out of the valley night by an inspired oneiric wind, I stood at the edge of a road, under a clear pure-gold sky, in an extraordinary mountainous land. Without looking, I sensed the lustre, the angles, and the facets of immense mosaic cliffs, dazzling precipices, and the mirrorlike glint of multitudinous lakes lying somewhere below, behind me. My soul was seized by a sense of heavenly iridescence, freedom, and loftiness: I knew that I was in Paradise. Yet, within this earthly soul, a single earthly thought rose like a piercing flame—and how jealously, how grimly I guarded it from the aura of gigantic beauty that surrounded me. This thought, this naked flame of suffering, was the thought of my earthly homeland. Barefoot and penniless, at the edge of a mountain road, I awaited the kind, luminous denizens of Heaven, while a wind, like the foretaste of a miracle, played in my hair, filled the gorges with a crystal hum, and ruffled the fabled silks of the trees that blossomed amid the cliffs lining the road. Tall grasses lapped at the tree trunks like tongues of fire; large flowers broke smoothly from the glittering branches and, like airborne goblets brimming with sunlight, glided through the air, puffing out their translucent convex petals. Their sweet, damp aroma reminded me of all the finest things I had experienced in my life.

Suddenly, the road on which I stood, breathless from the shimmer, was filled with a tempest of wings. Swarming out of the blinding depths came the angels I awaited, their folded wings pointing sharply upward. Their tread was ethereal; they were like colored clouds in motion, and their transparent visages were motionless except for the rapturous tremor of their radiant lashes. Among them, turquoise birds flew with peals of happy girlish laughter, and lithe orange animals loped, fantastically speckled with black. The creatures coiled through the air, silently thrusting out their satin paws to catch the airborne flowers as they circled and soared, pressing past me with flashing eyes.

Wings, wings, wings! How can I describe their convolutions and their tints? They were all-powerful and soft—tawny, purple, deep blue, velvety black, with fiery dust on the rounded tips of their bowed feathers. Like precipitous clouds they stood, imperiously poised above the angels' luminous shoulders; now and then an angel, in a kind of marvellous transport, as if unable to restrain his bliss, suddenly, for a single instant, unfurled his winged beauty, and it was like a burst of sunlight, like the sparkling of millions of eyes.

They passed in throngs, glancing heavenward. Their eyes were like jubilant chasms, and in those eyes I saw the syncope of flight. They came with gliding step, showered with flowers. The flowers spilled their humid sheen in flight; the sleek, bright beasts played, whirling and climbing; the birds chimed with bliss, soaring and dipping. I, a blinded, quaking beggar, stood at the edge of the road, and within my beggar's soul the selfsame thought kept prattling: Cry out to them, tell them—oh, tell them that on the most

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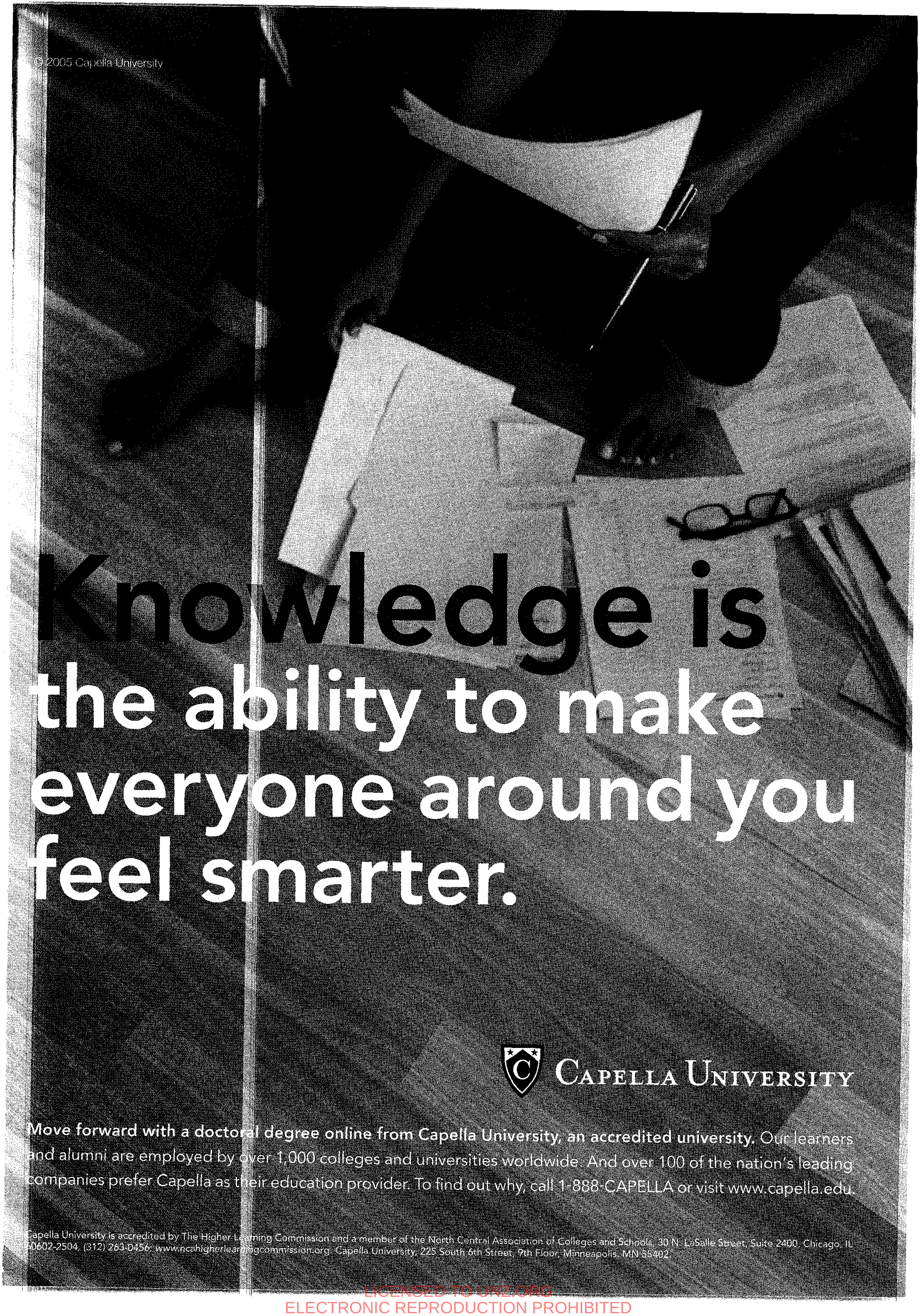

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splendid of God's stars there is a land—my land—that is dying in agonizing darkness. I had the sense that, if I could grasp with my hand but one quivering shimmer, I would bring to my country such joy that human souls would instantly be illumined, and would circle beneath the plash and crackle of resurrected springtime, to the golden thunder of reawakened temples.

Reaching out with trembling hands, striving to bar the angels' path, I began clutching at the hems of their bright chasubles, at the undulating, torrid fringes of their curved wings, which slipped through my fingers like downy flowers. I moaned, I dashed about, I deliriously beseeched their indulgence, but the angels trod ever forward, oblivious of me, their chiselled faces turned upward. They streamed in hosts to a heavenly feast, into an unendurably resplendent glade, where roiled and breathed a divinity about which I dared not think. I saw fiery cobwebs, splashes, designs on gigantic crimson, russet, violet wings, and, above me, a downy rustling passed in waves. The rainbow-crowned turquoise birds pecked, the flowers floated off from shiny boughs. "Wait, hear me out!" I cried, trying to embrace an angel's vaporous legs, but the feet, impalpable, unstoppable, slipped through my extended hands, and the borders of the broad wings only scorched my lips as they swept past. In the distance, a golden clearing between lush, vivid cliffs was filling with the surging storm; the angels were receding; the birds ceased their high-pitched agitated laughter; the flowers no longer flew from the trees; I grew feeble, I fell mute. . . .

Then a miracle occurred. One of the last angels lingered, turned, and quietly approached me. I caught sight of his cavernous, staring, diamond eyes under the imposing arches of his brows. On the ribs of his outspread wings glistened what seemed like frost. The wings themselves were gray, an ineffable tint of gray, and each feather ended in a silvery sickle. His visage, the faintly smiling outline of his lips, and his straight clear forehead reminded me of features I had seen on earth. The curves, the gleaming, the charm of all the faces I had ever loved—the features of people who had long since departed from me—seemed to merge into one wondrous countenance. All the familiar sounds that came separately into contact with my hearing now seemed to blend into a single, perfect melody.

He came up to me. He smiled. I could not look at him. But, glancing at his legs, I noticed a network of azure veins on his feet and one pale birthmark. From these veins, from that little spot, I understood that he had not yet totally abandoned earth, that he might understand my prayer.

Then, bending my head, pressing my singed palms, smeared with bright clay, to my half-blinded eyes, I began recounting my sorrows. I wanted to explain how wondrous my land was, and how horrid its black syncope, but I did not find the words I needed. Hurrying, repeating myself, I babbled about trifles, about some burned-down house where once the sunny sheen of parquet had been reflected in an inclined mirror. I prattled of old books and old lindens, of knickknacks, of my first poems in a cobalt schoolboy notebook, of some gray boulder, overgrown with wild raspberries, in the middle of a field filled with scabiosa and daisies—but the most important thing I simply could not express. I grew confused, I stopped short, I began anew, and again, in my helpless, rapid speech, I spoke of rooms in a cool and resonant country house, of lindens, of my first love, of bumblebees sleeping on the scabiosa. It seemed to me that any minute—any minute!—I would get to what was most important, I would explain the whole sorrow of my homeland. But for some reason I could remember only minute, quite mundane things that were unable to speak or weep those corpulent, burning, terrible tears, about which I wanted to but could not tell. . . .

I fell silent, raised my head. The angel smiled a quiet, attentive smile, gazed fixedly at me with his elongated diamond eyes. I felt he understood me.

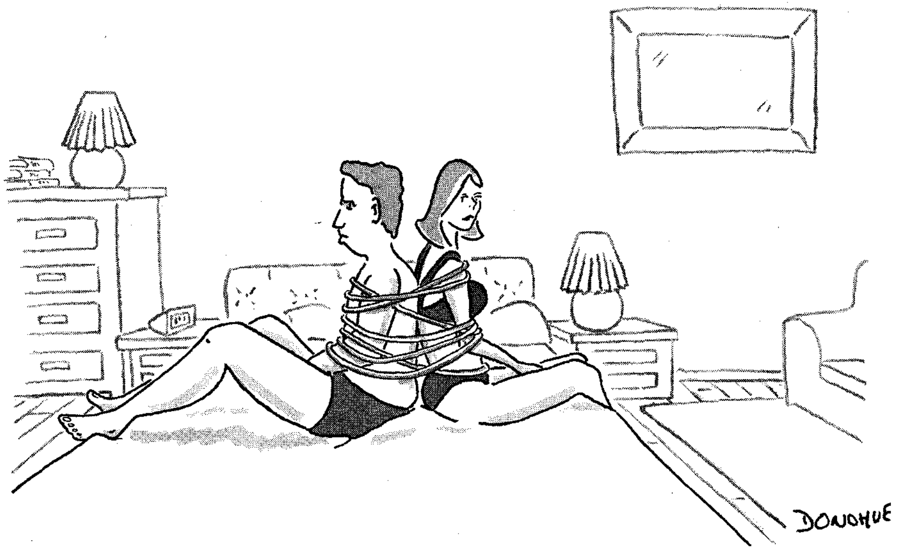
"Forgive me," I exclaimed, meekly kissing the birthmark on his light-hued foot. "Forgive that I am capable of speaking only about the ephemeral, the trivial. You understand, though, my kindhearted, my gray angel. Answer me, help me, tell me, what can save my land?"

Embracing my shoulders for an instant with his dovelike wings, the angel pronounced a single word, and in his voice I recognized all those beloved, those silenced voices. The word he spoke was so marvellous that, with a sigh, I closed my eyes and bowed my head still lower. The fragrance and the melody of the word spread through my veins, rose like a sun within my brain; the countless cavities within my consciousness caught up and repeated its lustrous edenic song. I was filled with it. Like a taut knot, it beat within my temple, its dampness trembled upon my lashes, its sweet chill fanned through my hair, and it poured heavenly warmth over my heart.

I shouted it, I revelled in its every syllable, I violently cast up my eyes, which were filled with the radiant rainbows of joyous tears. . . .

Oh, Lord—the winter dawn glows greenish in the window, and I remember not what word it was that I shouted. ♦

*(Translated, from the Russian, by Dmitri Nabokov.)*



*"Are you sure you've done this before?"*

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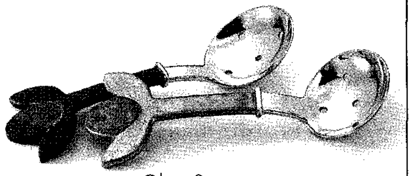

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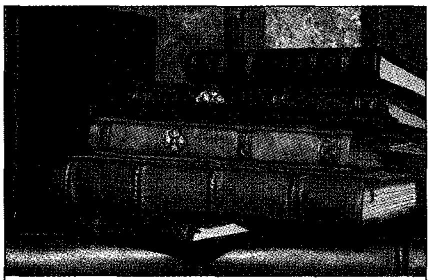

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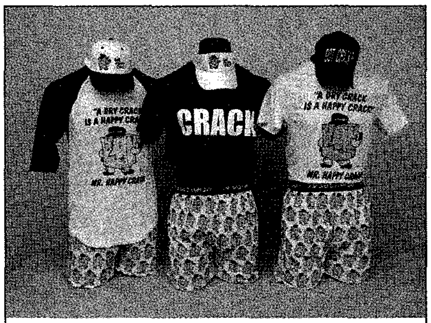

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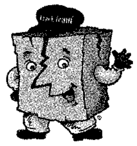

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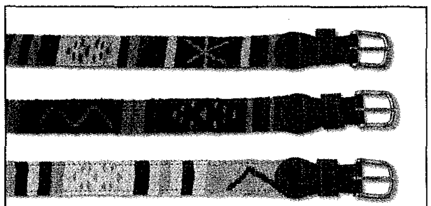

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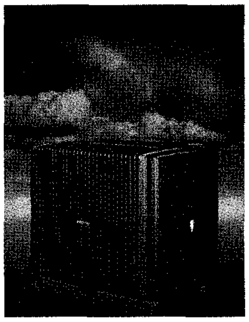

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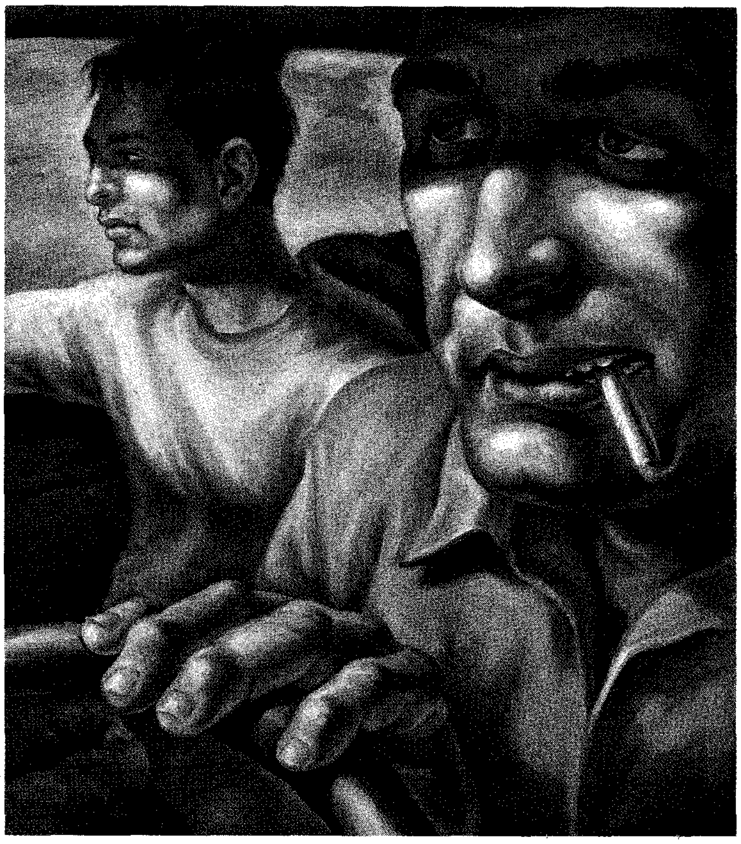
FICTION

# LAST EVENINGS ON EARTH

### BY ROBERTO BOLAÑO



This is the situation: B and his father are going on vacation to Acapulco. They are planning to leave very early, at six in the morning. B spends the night at his father's house. He doesn't dream, or, if he does, he forgets his dreams as soon as he opens his eyes. He hears his father in the bathroom. He looks out the window; it is still dark. He gets dressed without switching on the light. When he comes out of his room, his father is sitting at the table, reading the sports section from the day before, and breakfast is ready. Coffee and huevos rancheros. B says hello to his father and goes into the bathroom.

His father's car is a 1970 Ford Mustang. At six-thirty, they get into the car and head out of the city. The city is Mexico City, and the year in which B and his father leave Mexico City for a short vacation is 1975.

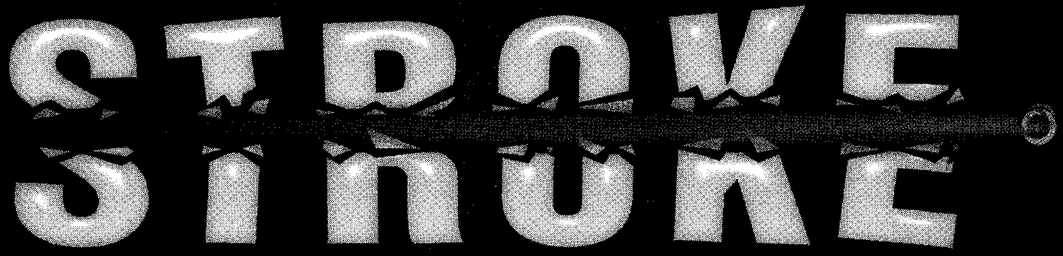
Over all, the trip goes smoothly. Driving out of the city, both father and son feel cold, but as they leave the high valley behind and descend into the state of Guerrero the temperature climbs and they have to take off their sweaters and roll down the windows. B, who is inclined to melancholy (or so he likes to think), is at first completely absorbed in contemplating the landscape, but after a few hours the mountains and forests become monotonous and he starts reading a book instead.

Before they get to Acapulco, B's father pulls up in front of a roadside café. The café serves iguana. Shall we try it? he suggests. The iguanas are alive and they hardly move when B's father goes over to look at them. B leans against the mudguard of the Mustang, watching him. Without waiting for an answer, B's father orders a portion of iguana for himself and one for his son. Only then does B move away from the car. He approaches the open-air eating area—four tables under a canvas awning that is swaying slightly in the breeze—and sits down at the table farthest from the highway. B's father orders two beers. Father and son have unbuttoned their shirts and rolled up their sleeves. Both are wearing light-colored shirts. The waiter, by contrast, is wearing a black long-sleeved shirt and doesn't seem bothered by the heat.

Going to Acapulco? the waiter asks. B's father nods. They are the only customers at the café. Cars whiz past on the bright highway. B's father gets up and goes out the back. For a moment, B thinks his father is going to the bathroom, but then he realizes that he has gone to the kitchen to see how they cook the iguanas. The waiter follows him without a word. B hears them talking. First his father, then the man's voice, and finally the voice of a woman B can't see. B's forehead is beaded with sweat. His glasses are misted and dirty. He takes them off and cleans them with his shirttail. When he puts them back on, he sees his father watching him from the kitchen. He can see only his father's face and part of his shoulder; the rest is hidden behind a red curtain with black dots, and B has the fleeting impression that this curtain separates not only the kitchen from the eating area but also one time from another.

Then B looks away and his gaze falls on the book lying on the table. It is a book of poetry, an anthology of French Surrealist poets, translated into Spanish by the Argentinean Surrealist Aldo Pellegrini. B has been reading this book for two days. He likes it. He likes the photos of the poets. The photo of Unik, the one of Desnos, the photos of Artaud and Crevel. The book is thick and covered with transparent plastic. It was covered not by B (who never covers his books) but by a particularly fastidious friend. B opens the book at random and

OWEN SMITH



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It is also used in patients with type 2 diabetes and at least one other risk factor for heart disease such as high blood pressure, smoking or complications of diabetes, including eye disease and protein in urine, to reduce the risk of heart attack and stroke.

LIPITOR is not for everyone. It is not for those with liver problems. And it is not for women who are nursing, pregnant or may become pregnant.

If you take LIPITOR, tell your doctor if you feel any new muscle pain or weakness. This could be a sign of serious muscle side effects. Tell your doctor about all the medicines you take. This may help avoid serious drug interactions. Your doctor should do blood tests to check your liver function before and during treatment and may adjust your dose. The most common side effects are gas, constipation, stomach pain and heartburn. They tend to be mild and often go away.

*Please see additional important information on next page.*

LIPITOR is one of many cholesterol-lowering treatment options in addition to diet and exercise that you and your doctor can consider.

---

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# IMPORTANT FACTS

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## LOWERING YOUR HIGH CHOLESTEROL

High cholesterol is more than just a number, it's a risk factor that should not be ignored. If your doctor said you have high cholesterol, you may be at an increased risk for heart attack. But the good news is, you can take steps to lower your cholesterol.

With the help of your doctor and a cholesterol-lowering medicine like LIPITOR, along with diet and exercise, you could be on your way to lowering your cholesterol. Ready to start eating right and exercising more? Talk to your doctor and visit the American Heart Association at www.americanheart.org.

## WHO IS LIPITOR FOR?

**Who can take LIPITOR:**

- People who cannot lower their cholesterol enough with diet and exercise
- Adults and children over 10

**Who should NOT take LIPITOR:**

- Women who are pregnant, may be pregnant, or may become pregnant. LIPITOR may harm your unborn baby. If you become pregnant, stop LIPITOR and call your doctor right away.
- Women who are breast-feeding. LIPITOR can pass into your breast milk and may harm your baby.
- People with liver problems
- People allergic to anything in LIPITOR

## BEFORE YOU START LIPITOR

Tell your doctor:

- About all medications you take, including prescriptions, over-the-counter medications, vitamins, and herbal supplements
- If you have muscle aches or weakness
- If you drink more than 2 alcoholic drinks a day
- If you have diabetes or kidney problems
- If you have a thyroid problem

## ABOUT LIPITOR

LIPITOR is a prescription medicine. Along with diet and exercise, it lowers "bad" cholesterol in your blood. It can also raise "good" cholesterol (HDL-C). In adults, it can lower the risk of heart attack in patients with multiple risk factors for heart disease—such as family history of heart disease, high blood pressure, older than 55, low "good" cholesterol, or smoking.

## POSSIBLE SIDE EFFECTS OF LIPITOR

Serious side effects in a small number of people:

- **Muscle problems** that can lead to kidney problems, including kidney failure. Your chance for muscle problems is higher if you take certain other medicines with LIPITOR.
- **Liver problems.** Your doctor may do blood tests to check your liver before you start LIPITOR and while you are taking it.

Symptoms of muscle or liver problems include:

- Unexplained muscle weakness or pain, especially if you have a fever or feel very tired
- Nausea, vomiting, or stomach pain
- Brown or dark-colored urine
- Feeling more tired than usual
- Your skin and the whites of your eyes turn yellow
- If you have these symptoms, call your doctor right away.

**The most common side effects of LIPITOR are:**

- Headache
- Diarrhea, gas
- Rash
- Constipation
- Upset stomach and stomach pain
- Muscle and joint pain

Side effects are usually mild and may go away by themselves. Fewer than 3 people out of 100 stopped taking LIPITOR because of side effects.

## HOW TO TAKE LIPITOR

**Do:**

- Take LIPITOR as prescribed by your doctor.
- Try to eat heart-healthy foods while you take LIPITOR.
- Take LIPITOR at any time of day, with or without food.
- If you miss a dose, take it as soon as you remember. But if it has been more than 12 hours since your missed dose, wait. Take the next dose at your regular time.

**Don't:**

- Do not change or stop your dose before talking to your doctor.
- Do not start new medicines before talking to your doctor.
- Do not give your LIPITOR to other people. It may harm them even if your problems are the same.
- Do not break the tablet.

## NEED MORE INFORMATION?

- Ask your doctor or health care provider.
- Talk to your pharmacist.
- Go to **www.lipitor.com** or call **1-888-LIPITOR**.

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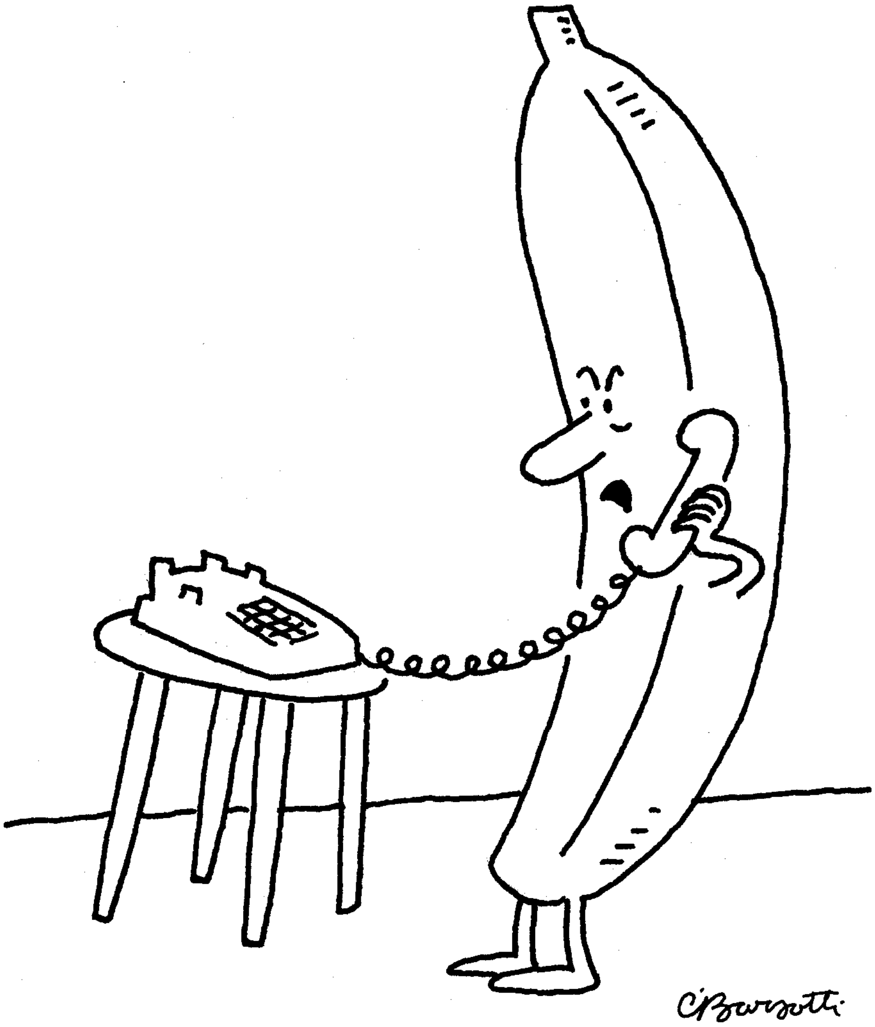
comes face to face with Gui Rosey—the photo of Gui Rosey and his poems—and when he looks up again his father's head has disappeared.

The heat is stifling. B would be more than happy to go back to Mexico City, but he isn't going back, at least not yet; he knows that. Soon, his father is sitting next to him and they are both eating iguana with chili sauce and drinking more beer. The waiter in the black shirt has turned on a transistor radio and now some vaguely tropical music is blending with the noises of the jungle and the noise of the cars passing on the highway. The iguana tastes like chicken. It's tougher than chicken, B says, not entirely convinced. It's tasty, his father says, and orders another portion. They have cinnamon coffee. The man in the black shirt serves the iguana, but the woman from the kitchen brings out the coffee. She is young, almost as young as B; she is wearing white shorts and a yellow blouse with white flowers printed on it, flowers B doesn't recognize, perhaps because they don't exist. As they drink their coffee, B feels nauseous, but he doesn't say anything. He smokes and looks at the canvas awning, which is barely moving, as if weighed down by a narrow puddle of rainwater. But it can't be that, B thinks. What are you looking at? his father asks. The awning, B says. It's like a vein. But he doesn't say the bit about the vein; he only thinks it.



*"How about an apple split for a change?"*

They arrive in Acapulco as night is falling. For a while, they drive up and down the avenues by the sea with the windows wide open and the breeze ruffling their hair. They stop at a bar and go in for a drink. This time, B's father orders tequila. B thinks for a moment. Then he orders tequila, too. The bar is modern and has air-conditioning. B's father talks with the waiter and asks him about hotels near the beach. By the time they get back to the Mustang, a few stars are visible, and for the first time that day B's father looks tired. Even so, they visit a couple of hotels, which for one reason or another are found unsatisfactory, before finding one that will do. The hotel is called La Brisa; it's small, a stone's throw from the beach, and has a swimming pool. B's father likes it. So does B. It's the off-season, so the hotel is almost empty and the prices are reasonable. The room they are given has two twin beds and a small bathroom with a shower. The only window looks onto the hotel's terrace, where the swimming pool is. B's father would have preferred a sea view. The air-conditioning, they soon discover, is out of order. But the room is fairly cool, so they don't complain. They make themselves at home: each opens up his suitcase and puts his clothes in the wardrobe. B puts his books on the bedside table. They change their shirts. B's father takes a cold shower while B just washes his face, and when they are ready they go out to dinner.

The reception desk is manned by a short guy with teeth like a rabbit's. He's young and seems friendly. He recommends a restaurant near the hotel. B's father asks if there's somewhere lively nearby. B understands what his father means. The receptionist doesn't. A place with a bit of action, B's father says. A place where you can find girls, B says. Ah, the receptionist says. For a moment, B and his father stand there, without speaking. The receptionist crouches down, disappearing behind the counter, and reappears with a card, which he holds out. B's father looks at the card, asks if the establishment is reliable, then extracts a bill from his wallet, which the receptionist catches on the fly.

But after dinner they go straight back to the hotel.

The next day, B wakes up very early. As quietly as possible, he takes a shower, brushes his teeth, puts on his bathing suit, and leaves the room. The hotel is on a street that runs straight down to the beach, which is empty except for a boy renting out surfboards. B asks him how much it costs for an hour. The boy quotes a price that sounds reasonable, so B rents a board and pushes off into the sea. Out a ways is a little island, toward which he steers the board. At first, he has some trouble, but soon he gets the hang of it. At this time of day, the sea is crystal clear, and B thinks he can see red fish under the board, about a foot and a half long, swimming toward the beach as he paddles toward the island.

It takes exactly fifteen minutes for him to get from the beach to the island. B doesn't know this, because he isn't wearing a watch, and for him time slows down. The crossing seems to last an eternity. At the last minute, waves rear unexpectedly, impeding his approach. The sand on the island is noticeably different from that of the beach by the hotel; back there it was a golden, tawny color, perhaps because of the time of day (though B doesn't think so), while here it is a dazzling white, so bright it hurts his eyes to look at it.

B stops paddling and just sits there, at the mercy of the waves, which begin to carry him slowly away from the island. By the time he finally reacts, he has drifted halfway back. B decides to turn around. The return is calm and uneventful. When he gets to the beach, the boy who rents out the boards comes up and asks if he had a problem. Not at all, B says. An hour later, B returns to the hotel without having had breakfast and finds his father sitting in the dining room with a cup of coffee and a plate in front of him on which are scattered the remains of toast and eggs.

The following hours are hazy. They drive around aimlessly, watching people from the car. Sometimes they get out to have a cold drink or an ice cream. In the afternoon, on the beach, while his father is stretched out asleep in a deck chair, B rereads Gui Rosey's poems and the brief story of his life or his death:

One day, a group of Surrealists arrives in the South of France, from Paris. The north and the west of the country are occupied by the Germans. The south is under the control of Pétain. They try to get visas to go to the United States. Day after day, the U.S. consulate delays its decision. Among the members of the group are Breton, Tzara, and Péret, but there are also less famous figures. Gui Rosey is one of them. In the photo, he has the look of a minor poet, B thinks. He is ugly; he is impeccably dressed; he looks like an unimportant civil servant or a bank teller. Up to this point, a few disagreements, but nothing out of the ordinary, B thinks. The Surrealists gather every afternoon at a café by the port. They make plans and chat; Rosey is always there. But one afternoon he fails to appear. At first, he isn't missed. He is a minor poet and no one pays much attention to minor poets. After a few days, however, the others start to worry. At the pension where he is staying, no one knows what has happened; his suitcases and books are there, undisturbed, so he clearly hasn't tried to leave without paying (as guests at pensions on the Côte d'Azur are prone to do). His friends try to find him. They visit all the hospitals and police stations in the area. No one can tell them anything. One morning, the visas arrive. Most of the group boards a ship and sets off for the United States. Those who remain, who will never get visas, soon forget about Rosey and his disappearance; people are disappearing all the time, in large numbers, and they have to look out for themselves.

That night, after dinner at the hotel, B's father suggests they go and find a bit of action. B looks at his father. He is blond (B is dark), his eyes are gray, and he is still in good shape. He looks happy and ready to have a good time. What sort of action? asks B, who knows perfectly well what his father is referring to. The usual kind, B's father says. Drinking and women. For a while, B says nothing, as if he were pondering a reply. His father looks at him. The look might seem inquisitive, but in fact it is only affectionate. Finally, B says he's not in the mood for sex. It's not just about getting laid, his father says. We'll go and see, have a few drinks, and enjoy ourselves with some friends. What friends? B says. We don't know anyone here. You always make friends when you're out for a ride. The expression makes B think of horses. When he was seven, his father bought him a horse. Where did my horse come from? B asks now. This takes his father by surprise. Horse? he asks. The one you bought me when I was a kid, B says, in Chile. Ah, Hullabaloo, his father says, smiling. He was from the island of Chiloé, he says, then after a moment's reflection he starts talking about brothels again. The way he talks about them, they could be dance halls, B thinks. Then both of them fall silent.

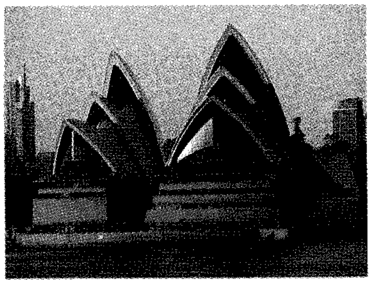
That night they don't go anywhere.

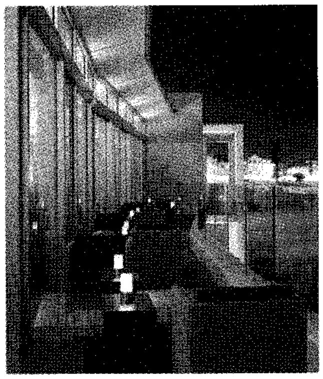
While his father is sleeping, B goes out to the terrace to read by the swimming pool. The terrace is empty except for him. From his table, B can see part of the reception area, where the receptionist from the night before is standing at the counter reading something or doing the accounts. B reads the French Surrealists; he reads Gui Rosey. To tell the truth, Gui Rosey doesn't interest him much. He is far more inter-

E. S. Richards

*"Yes, Aunt Toddy, the character called Aunt Toddy is based largely on you."*

POSTMARK
*Sydney, Australia*





# Sydney Woos With Wilderness and World-Class Style

*By Rudy Maxa*

There are places in the Blue Mountains near Sydney where fog nestles in the creases of hillsides, impossibly long, thin waterfalls cascade down rock cliffs, and white cockatoos with their yellow crests flit from tree to tree. Climb or drive to a high spot at dusk, overlook the forest canopy, and note how the moisture evaporating from eucalyptus trees gives the horizon its bluish tint that turns fiery red as the sun sets.

This vast wilderness, dotted with villages and romantic inns, is only an hour's drive from downtown Sydney—Australia's first and largest city whose icon is a striking opera house but whose real lure lies in the energy and friendliness of its residents, its multicultural cuisine, stunning architecture, and beaches with sand as fine as sugar.

Welcome to New South Wales, Australia's southeastern state where Sydneysiders (as residents are called) can surf during lunch and, that same evening, take tea near a welcoming fire at a Blue Mountains resort.

Try this out for a sample day in Sydney—the city consistently rated by Americans as their favorite in the world: Awake in your room at the Four Seasons, located in the desirable tip of the city called The Rocks, and open the curtains for a panoramic view of Sydney Harbor. Take a swim in the rooftop pool to wake up and consider breakfast at Bill's Cafe, a homey eatery in the Darlinghurst neighborhood owned by celebrity chef Bill Granger, famous for his ricotta cheese hotcakes with honeycomb butter. Get there early on weekends to beat the line.

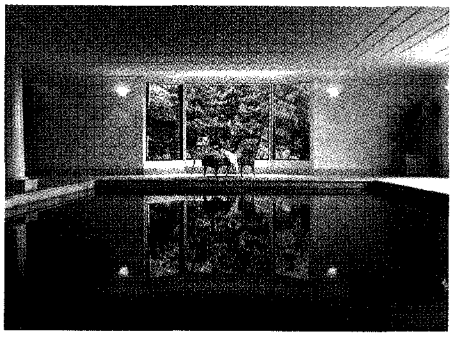
After breakfast take a helicopter tour of the Sydney harbor and coastline. It's eye-popping topography, from the perfect curve of Bondi Beach to the botanical gardens near the Sydney Opera House, will give you an idea of the diversity of the city and its environs. Then see the harbor at eye level: Charter a crewed sailboat from Sydney By Sail and check out the famous city skyline from the perspective of the water.

PHOTOS CLOCKWISE: BLUE MOUNTAINS © ALAMY; SYDNEY OPERA HOUSE AND BONDI BEACH COURTESY OF TOURISM NEW SOUTH WALES; © ICEBERGS; © MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

POSTMARK////
*Sydney, Australia*

For lunch, hop a taxi to the fish market for just-shucked oysters and sushi that arrived that morning. If you really love the life aquatic, visit here just before six o'clock on weekday mornings to witness the lively seafood auction. Not enough fish? How about strapping on some dive gear at Oceanworld on Manly Beach and immersing yourself in a tank, where the sharks pass so close to you that you'll be able to count their teeth.

If you'd rather look *down* on water than be in it, take lunch at Icebergs, the hip restaurant perched above spectacular Bondi Beach. Order the house staple: Quick-fried, golden harbor prawns prepared in corn flour, semolina, crushed green oregano and paired with a side of aioli. Pop the entire prawn in your mouth for a flavorful crunch. Beneath you, members swim in Icebergs' private pool that overlooks Bondi Beach, home to surfers, sun worshippers, lithe young things doing yoga, and the famous local lifeguards—this is where lifeguarding was invented. The beach is bustling on weekends, but there's plenty of room for your towel on weekdays.



Sydney is a city for browsing and shopping. Every Saturday on the grounds of the historic Paddington Uniting Church, Paddington market features handicrafts several cuts above your average local market. Local designers offer their unique fashion, glasswork, and jewelry as memorable spoils from the stylish city. At the harbor's edge, the Museum of Contemporary Art displays exciting works that includes Australian artists and an extensive collection of Aboriginal art.

An array of dining and nightclub possibilities is just a couple of blocks away. At Rockpool on George Street, Chef Neil Perry surprises and delights with dishes such as a salad of wild green lip abalone, mussels, clams, tea-smoked oysters, and fine noodles with truffle oil and mushroom soy dressing.

An ideal New South Wales holiday would include both Sydney and the Blue Mountains, where the Orient-Express hotel, Lilianfels Blue Mountains Resort & Spa, boasts eighty-five luxurious rooms and suites, and is only a ninety-minute drive from downtown Sydney but a world away from the bustle. A day spa, tennis court, outdoor heated pool, and nearby golf courses make this a perfect country retreat. Wilderness coupled with a world-class city. Welcome to New South Wales.

*(Host and co-executive producer of public television series "Smart Travels," Rudy Maxa is currently shooting episodes on the Pacific Rim.)*

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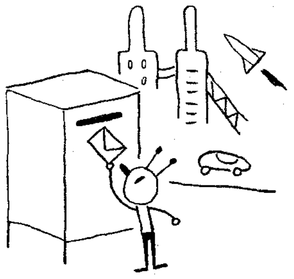
ested in Desnos and Éluard, and yet he always ends up coming back to Rosey's poems and looking at his photo, a studio portrait, in which he has the air of a solitary, wretched soul, with large, glassy eyes and a dark tie that seems to be strangling him.

He must have committed suicide, B thinks. He knew he was never going to get a visa, so he decided to end it there and then. B imagines or tries to imagine a town on the Mediterranean coast of France. He has been all over Latin America, or almost, but he still hasn't set foot in Europe. So his image of a Mediterranean town is derived from his image of Acapulco. Heat; a small, cheap hotel; beaches of golden sand and beaches of white sand. And the distant sound of music. B doesn't realize that there is a crucial element missing from the soundtrack of this scene: the clanging rigging of the small boats that throng the ports of all the towns on the Mediterranean coast. The sound of the rigging at night, when the sea is as still as a millpond.

Someone comes out to the terrace. The silhouette of a woman. She sits down at the farthest table, in a corner, near two large urns. A moment later, the receptionist appears, bringing her a drink. Then, instead of going back to the counter, he comes over to B, who is sitting by the edge of the pool, and asks if he and his father are having a good time. Very good, B says. Do you like Acapulco? the receptionist asks. Very much, B says. How was the San Diego? the receptionist asks. B doesn't understand the question. The San Diego? For a moment, he thinks the receptionist is referring to the hotel, but then he remembers that the hotel is called something else. Which San Diego? B asks. The receptionist smiles. The club with the hookers. Then B remembers the card the receptionist gave his father. We haven't gone yet, he says. It's a reliable place, the receptionist says. B moves his head in a way that could mean almost anything. It's on Constituyentes, the receptionist says. There's another club on that avenue, the Ramada, but I wouldn't recommend it. The Ramada, B says, watching the woman's motionless silhouette in the corner of the terrace and the apparently untouched glass in front of her, between the enormous urns, whose shadows stretch and taper off under the neighboring tables. Best to steer clear of the Ramada, the receptionist says. Why? B asks, for something to say, although he has no intention of visiting either place. It's not reliable, the receptionist says, and his bright little rabbit teeth shine in the semidarkness that has suddenly submerged the terrace, as if someone at reception had switched off half of the lights.



When the receptionist goes away, B opens his book of poetry again, but the words are illegible now, so he leaves the book open on the table, shuts his eyes, and, instead of the faint chimes of rigging, he hears an atmospheric sound, the sound of enormous layers of hot air descending on the hotel and the surrounding trees. He feels like getting into the pool. For a moment, he thinks he might.

Then the woman in the corner stands up and begins to walk toward the stairs that lead from the terrace up to the reception area, but midway she stops, as if she felt ill, resting one hand on the edge of a planter in which there are no longer flowers, only weeds.

B watches her. The woman is wearing a loose, light-colored summer dress, cut low, leaving her shoulders bare. He expects her to start walking again, but she stands still, her hand fixed to the planter, looking down, so B gets up with the book in his hand and goes over to her. The first thing that surprises him is her face. She's about sixty years old, B guesses, although from a distance he wouldn't have said she was more than thirty. She is North American, and when he approaches she looks up and smiles at him. Good night, she says, rather incongruously, in Spanish. Are you all right? B asks. The woman doesn't understand, and B has to ask again, in English. I'm just thinking, the woman says, smiling at him fixedly. For a few seconds, B considers what she has said to him. Thinking, thinking, thinking. And suddenly it seems to him that this declaration conceals a threat. Something approaching over the sea. Something advancing in the wake of the dark clouds crossing the Bay of Acapulco. But he doesn't move or make any attempt to break the spell that seems to be holding him captive. Then the woman looks at the book in B's left hand and asks him what he is reading, and B says, Poetry. I'm reading poems. The woman looks him in the eyes, with the same smile on her face (a smile that is at once bright and faded, B thinks, feeling more uneasy by the moment), and says that she used to like poetry, at one time. Which poets? B asks, keeping absolutely still. I can't remember them now, the woman says, and again she seems to lose herself in the contemplation of something visible only to her. B assumes she is making an effort to remember, and waits in silence. After a while, she looks at him again and says, Longfellow. And straightaway she starts reciting lines with a monotonous rhythm which sound to B like a nursery rhyme, a far cry, in any case, from the poets he is reading. Do you know Longfellow? the woman asks. B shakes his head, although in fact he has read some Longfellow. We did it in school, the woman says, with her invariable smile. And then she adds, It's too hot, don't you think? It is very hot, B whispers. There could be a storm coming, the woman says. There is something very definite about her tone. At this point, B looks up: he can't see a single star. But he can see lights in the hotel. And, at the window of his room, the shape of someone watching them makes him start, as if he had just been struck by the first, sudden drops of a tropical downpour.

For a moment, he is bewildered.

It is his father, on the other side of the glass, wrapped in a blue bathrobe that he must have brought with him (B hasn't seen it before and it certainly doesn't belong to the hotel), staring at them, although when B notices him his father steps back, recoiling as if bitten by a snake, lifts his hand in a shy wave, and disappears behind the curtains.

The Song of Hiawatha, the woman says. B looks at her. The Song of Hiawatha, the poem by Longfellow. Ah, yes, B says.

Then the woman says good night, again, and makes a gradual exit: first she goes up the stairs to reception, where she spends a few moments chatting

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with someone B can't see, then she sets off across the hotel lobby, her slim figure framed by successive windows, until she turns into the corridor that leads to the inside stairs.

Half an hour later, B goes to their room and finds his father asleep again. For a few seconds, before going to the bathroom to brush his teeth, B stands very straight at the foot of the bed, gazing at him, as if steeling himself for a fight. Good night, Dad, he says. His father gives not the slightest indication that he has heard.

On the second full day of their stay in Acapulco, B and his father go to see the cliff divers. They have two options: they can watch the show from an open-air platform or go to the bar-restaurant of the hotel that overlooks the cliff. B's father asks about the prices. The first person he asks doesn't know. He persists. Finally, an old ex-diver who is hanging around doing nothing tells him what it costs: six times more to watch from the hotel bar. Let's go to the bar, B's father says without hesitating. We'll be more comfortable. B follows him. The other people in the bar are North American or Mexican tourists wearing what are obviously vacation clothes; B and his father stand out. They are dressed as people dress in Mexico City, in clothes that seem to belong to some endless dream. The waiters notice. They know the sort—no chance of a big tip—so they make no effort to serve them promptly. To top it off, B and his father can hardly see the show from where they are sitting. We would have been better off on the platform, B's father says. Although it's not bad here, either, he adds. B nods. When the diving is over, having drunk two cocktails each, they go outside and start making plans for the rest of the day. Hardly anyone is left on the platform, but B's father recognizes the old ex-diver sitting on a railing and goes over to him.

The ex-diver is short and has a very broad back. He is reading a cowboy novel and doesn't look up until B and his father are at his side. He recognizes them and asks what they thought of the show. Not bad, B's father says, although in precision sports you need experience to judge properly. Would I be right in guessing that you were a sportsman yourself? the ex-diver asks. B's father looks at him for a moment and then says, You could say that. The ex-diver gets to his feet with an energetic movement, as if he were back on the edge of the cliff. He must be about fifty, B thinks, so he's not much older than my father, but the wrinkles on his face, like scars, make him look much older. Are you gentlemen on vacation? the ex-diver asks. B's father nods and smiles. And what was your sport, sir, if I might ask? Boxing, B's father says. How about that, the ex-diver says. So you must have been a heavyweight? B's father smiles broadly and says yes.

Before he knows what is going on, B finds himself walking toward the Mustang with his father and the ex-diver and then all three get into the car and B listens to the ex-diver giving his father instructions as if he were listening to the radio. For a while, the car glides along the Avenida Costera Miguel Alemán, but then they turn and head inland, and soon the tourist hotels and restaurants give way to an ordinary cityscape with tropical touches. The car keeps climbing, heading away from the golden horseshoe of Acapulco, driving along badly paved or unpaved roads, until it pulls up beside the dusty sidewalk in front of a cheap restaurant, a fixed-price place. The ex-diver and B's father get out of the car immediately. They have been talking all the way, and while they wait for B on the sidewalk they continue their conversation, gesturing incomprehensibly. B takes his time getting out of the car. We're going in to eat, his father says. So it seems, B says.

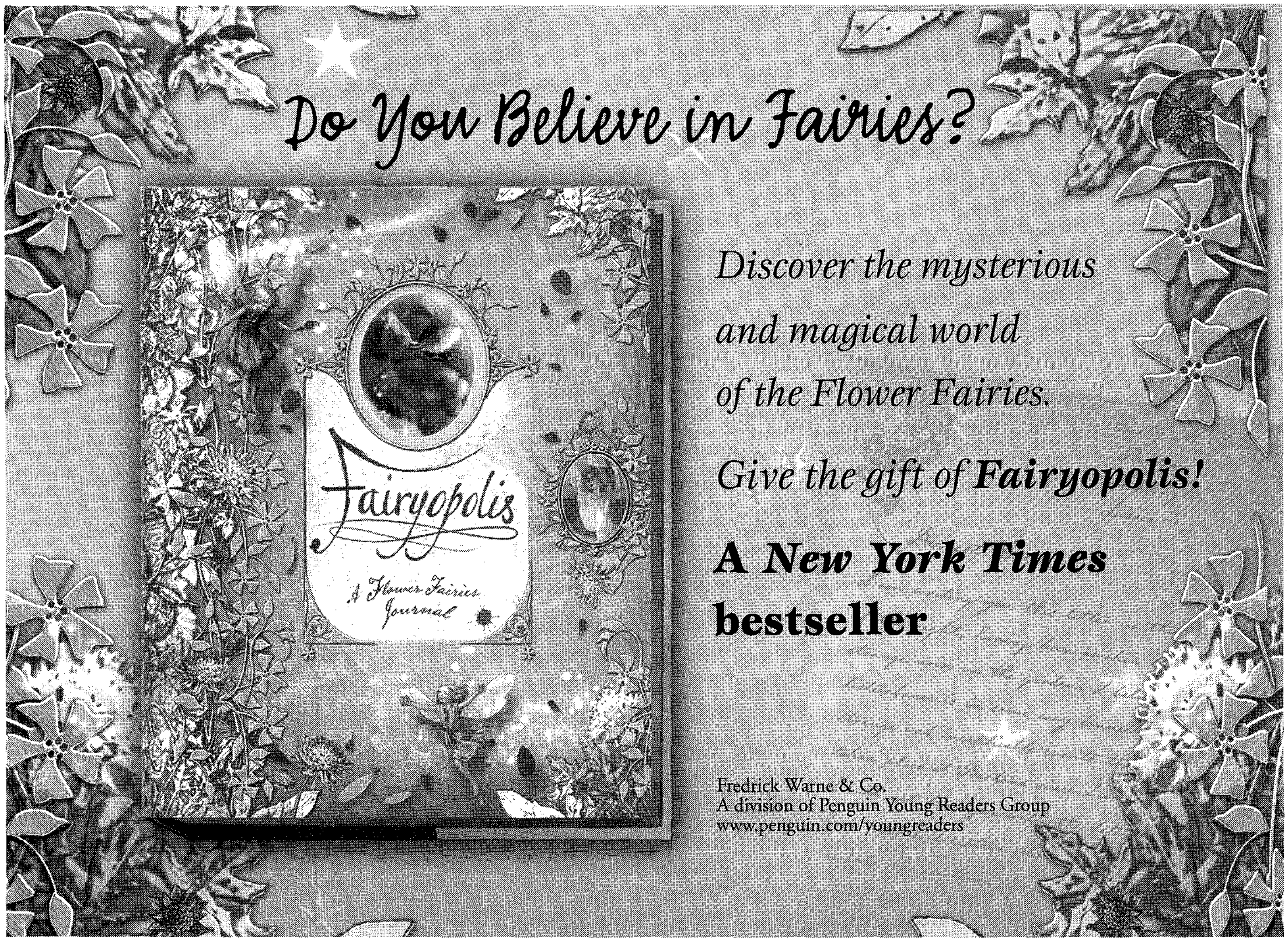
The place is dark inside and only a quarter of the space is occupied by tables. The rest looks like a dance floor, with a stage for the band, surrounded by a long balustrade made of rough wood. At first, B can't see a thing, but then his eyes adjust to the darkness and he sees a man coming over to the ex-diver. They look alike. The stranger listens attentively to an introduction that B doesn't catch, shakes hands with his father, and a few seconds later turns to B. B reaches out to shake his hand. The stranger says a name, and his handshake, which is no doubt meant to be friendly, is not so much firm as violent. He does not smile. B decides not to smile, either. B's father and the ex-diver are already sitting at a table. B sits down next to them. The stranger, who turns out to be the ex-diver's younger brother, stands beside them, waiting for instructions. The gentleman here, the ex-diver says, was heavyweight champion of his country. So you're foreigners? his brother asks. Chileans, B's father says. Do you have red snapper? the ex-diver says. We do, his brother says. Bring us one, then, a red snapper Guerrero style, the ex-diver says. And beers all around, B's father says, for you, too. Thank you, the brother murmurs, taking a notebook from his pocket and painstakingly writing down an order that, in B's opinion, a child could remember.

Along with the beers, the brother brings them some savory crackers to nibble and three rather small glasses of oysters. They're fresh, the ex-diver says, putting chili sauce on all three. Funny, isn't it. This stuff's called chili and so's your country, he says, pointing to the bottle full of bright-red chili sauce. Yes, intriguing, isn't it. Like the way the sauce is the opposite of chilly, he adds. B looks at his father with barely veiled incredulity. The conversation revolves around boxing and diving until the red snapper arrives.

Later, B and his father leave. The hours have flown by without their noticing and by the time they climb into the Mustang it is already seven in the evening. The ex-diver comes with them. For a moment, B thinks they'll never get rid of him, but when they reach the center of Acapulco the ex-diver gets out in front of a billiard hall. When he has gone, B's father comments favorably on the service at the restaurant and the price they paid for the red snapper. If we'd had it here, he says, pointing to the hotels along the beachfront, it would have cost an arm and a leg. When they get back to their room, B puts on his bathing suit and goes to the beach. He swims for a while and then tries to read in the fading light. He reads the Surrealist poets and is completely bewildered. A peaceful, solitary man, on the brink of death. Images, wounds. That is all he can see. And the images are dissolving little by little, like the setting sun, leaving only the wounds. A minor poet disappears while waiting for a visa to admit him to the New World. A minor poet disappears without a trace, hopelessly stranded in some town on the Mediterranean coast of France. There is no investigation. There is no corpse. By the time B turns to Daumal, night has already fallen on the beach; he shuts the book and slowly makes his way back to the hotel.

After dinner, his father proposes that they go out and have some fun. B declines this invitation. He suggests to his father that he go alone, and says that he's not in the mood for fun; he'd prefer to stay in the room and watch a film on TV. I can't believe it, his father says. You're behaving like an old man, at your age! B looks at his father, who is putting on clean clothes after a shower, and laughs.

Before his father goes out, B tells



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*"They do have a calming presence."*

him to take care. His father looks at him from the doorway and says he's only going to have a couple of drinks. You take care yourself, he says, and gently shuts the door.

Once he's on his own, B takes off his shoes, looks for his cigarettes, turns on the TV, and collapses onto the bed. Without intending to, he falls asleep. He dreams that he is living in (or visiting) the city of the Titans. The dream is an endless wandering through vast dark streets that recall other dreams. And in the dream his attitude is one that he knows he doesn't have in waking life. Faced with buildings whose voluminous shadows seem to be knocking against one another, he is, if not exactly courageous, unworried or indifferent.

A while later, B wakes up with a jolt, and, as if responding to a summons, turns off the TV and goes to the window. On the terrace, half-hidden in the same corner as the night before, the North American woman is sitting with a cocktail or a glass of fruit juice in front of her. B observes her indifferently, then goes back and sits on the bed, opens his book of Surrealist poets, and tries to read. But he can't. So he tries to think, and to that end he lies down on the bed again, with his arms outstretched, and shuts his eyes. For a moment, he thinks he is on the point of falling asleep. He even catches an oblique glimpse of a street from the dream city. But soon he realizes that he is only remembering the dream; he opens his eyes and lies there for a while, contemplating the ceiling. Then he switches off the bedside lamp and goes back over to the window.

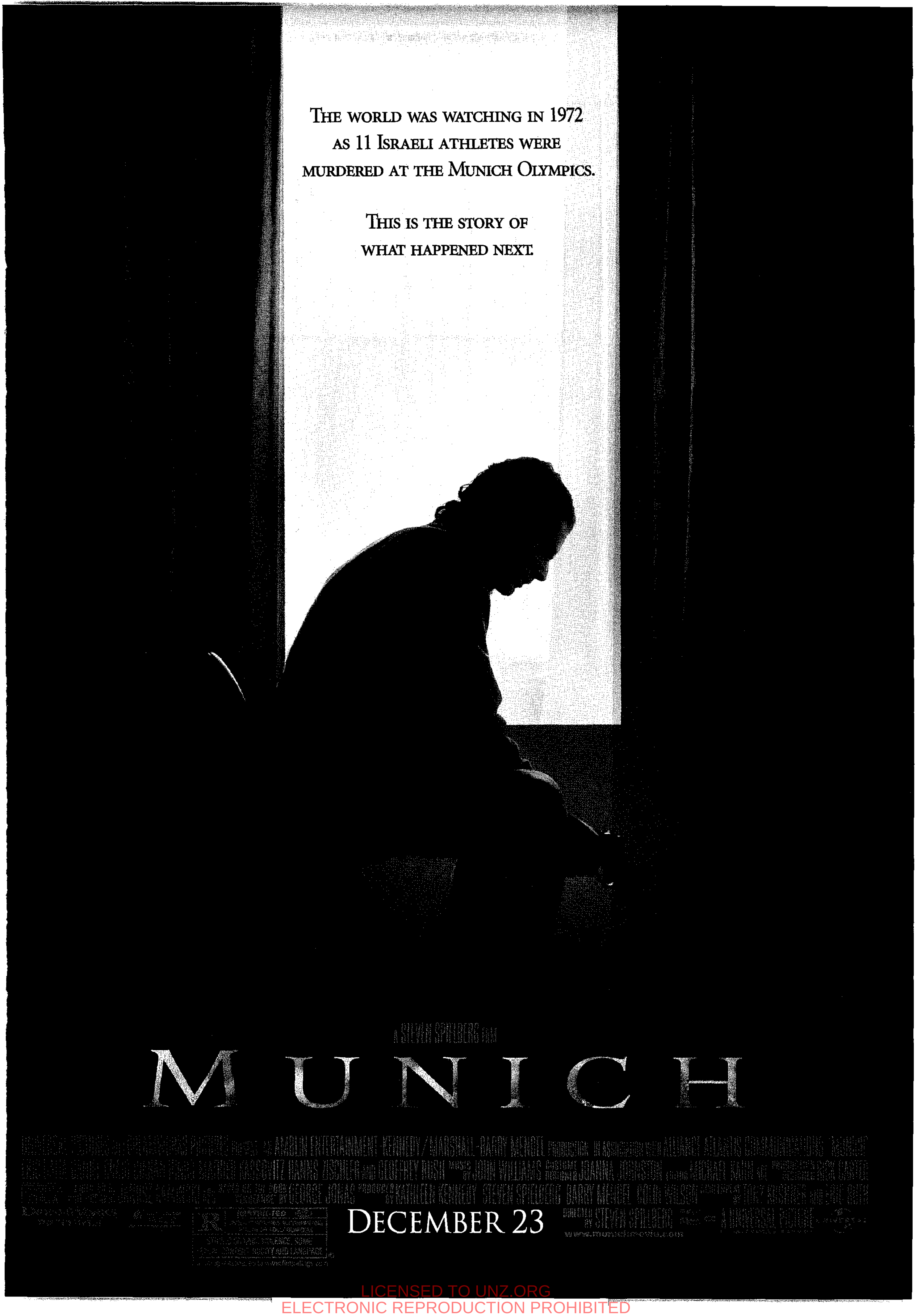
The North American woman is still there, motionless. The shadows of the urns stretch out and touch the shadows of the neighboring tables. The reception area, fully lit, unlike the terrace, is reflected in the swimming pool. Suddenly, a car pulls up a few yards from the entrance of the hotel. His father's Mustang, B thinks. But no one appears at the hotel gate for a long time, and B thinks he must have been mistaken. Then he makes out his father's silhouette climbing the stairs. First his head, then his broad shoulders, then the rest of his body, and finally the shoes, a pair of white moccasins that B, as a rule, finds profoundly disgusting, but the feeling they provoke in him now is something like tenderness. The way he came into the hotel, he thinks, it was like he was dancing. The way he made his entrance, it was as if he had come back from a wake, unconsciously glad to be alive. But the strangest thing is that, after appearing briefly in the reception area, his father turns around and heads toward the terrace; he goes down the stairs, walks around the pool, and sits at a table near the North American woman. And when the guy from reception finally appears with a glass, his father pays and, without even waiting for him to be gone, gets up, glass in hand, goes over to the table where the North American woman is sitting, and stands there for a while, gesticulating and drinking, until, apparently at the woman's invitation, he takes a seat beside her.

She's too old for him, B thinks. Then he goes back to his bed, lies down, and soon realizes that all the sleepiness that was weighing him down before has evaporated. Still, he doesn't want to turn on the light (although he feels like reading); he doesn't want his father to think (even for a moment) that B is spying on him. He thinks about women; he thinks about travel. Finally, he goes to sleep.

Twice during the night, he wakes up with a start and sees that his father's bed is empty. The third time, day is already dawning and he sees his father's back: he is sleeping deeply. B turns on the light and stays in bed for a while, smoking and reading.

Later that morning, B goes to the beach and hires a surfboard. This time, he has no trouble reaching the island. There he has a mango juice and swims for a while in the sea, alone. Then he goes back to the beach by the hotel, returns the board to the boy, who smiles at him, and takes a roundabout way back to the hotel. He finds his father in the dining room drinking coffee. He sits down beside him. His father has just shaved and gives off an odor of cheap aftershave that B finds pleasant. On his right cheek there is a scratch from ear to chin. B considers asking him what happened last night, but decides not to.

The rest of the day goes by in a blur. At some point, B and his father walk along a beach near the airport. The beach is vast and lined with wattle-roofed shacks where the fishermen keep their gear. The sea is choppy; for a while B and his father watch the waves breaking in the bay of Puerto Marqués. A fisherman tells them that it's not a good day for swimming. You're right, B says. His father goes in for a swim anyway. B sits down on the sand, with his knees up, and watches him advance to meet the waves. The fisherman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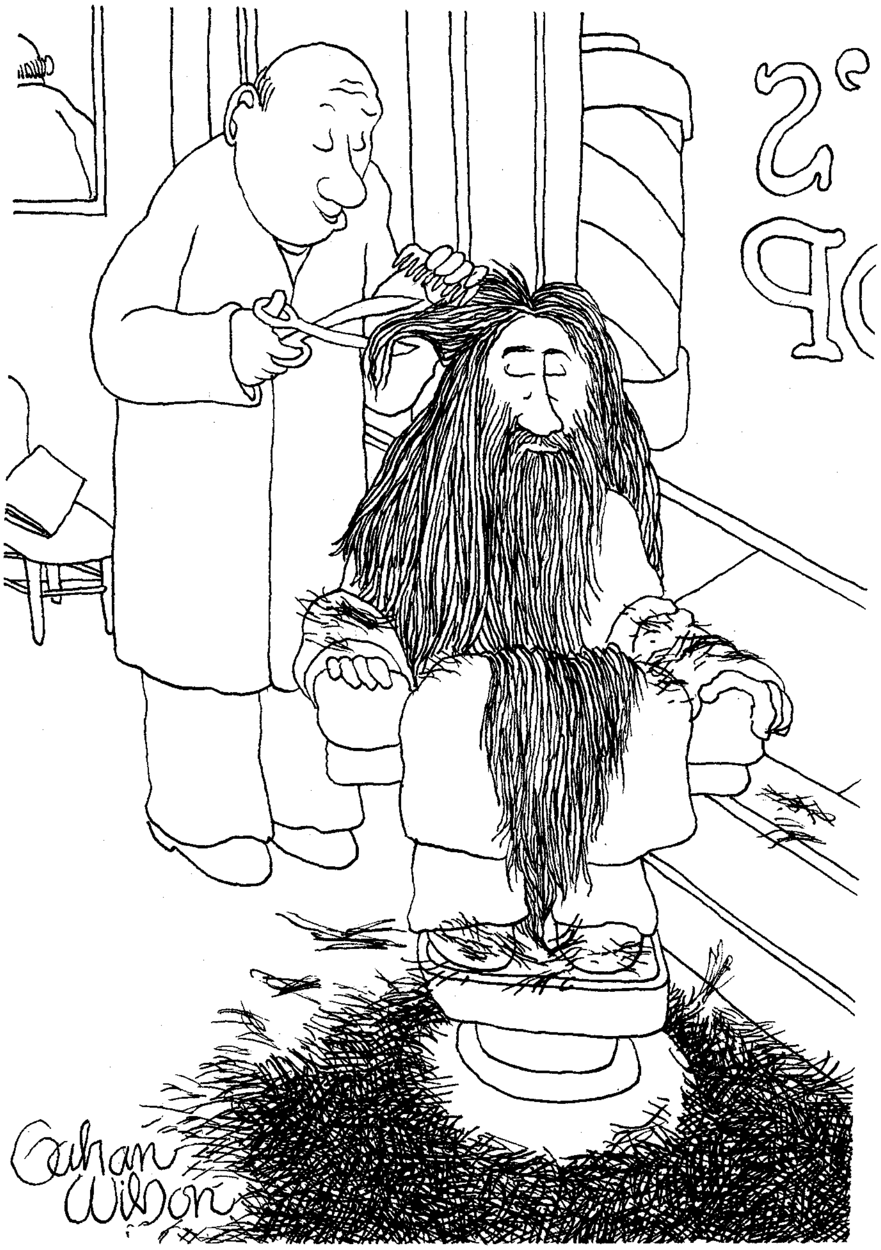
shades his eyes and says something that B doesn't catch. For a moment, he loses sight of his father's head, and his arms stroking seaward. Now there are two boys with the fisherman. They are all standing, looking out to sea, except for B, who is still sitting down. A plane appears in the sky, curiously inaudible. B stops looking at the sea and watches the plane until it disappears behind a rounded hill covered with vegetation. He remembers waking up, exactly a year before, at the Acapulco airport. He was returning from Chile, on his own, and the plane stopped in Acapulco. He remembers opening his eyes and seeing an orange light with blue and pink overtones, like the fading colors of an old film, and knowing then that he was back in Mexico and safe at last, in a sense. That was in 1974, and B had not yet turned twenty-one. Now he is twenty-two and his father must be about forty-nine. B closes his eyes. Because of the wind, the fisherman's and the boys' cries of alarm are unintelligible. The sand is cold. When he opens his eyes, he sees his father coming out of the sea. He shuts his eyes and doesn't open them again until he feels a large wet hand grip his shoulder and hears his father's voice proposing that they go eat turtle eggs.

There are things you can tell people and things you just can't, B thinks disconsolately. From this moment on, he knows the disaster is approaching.

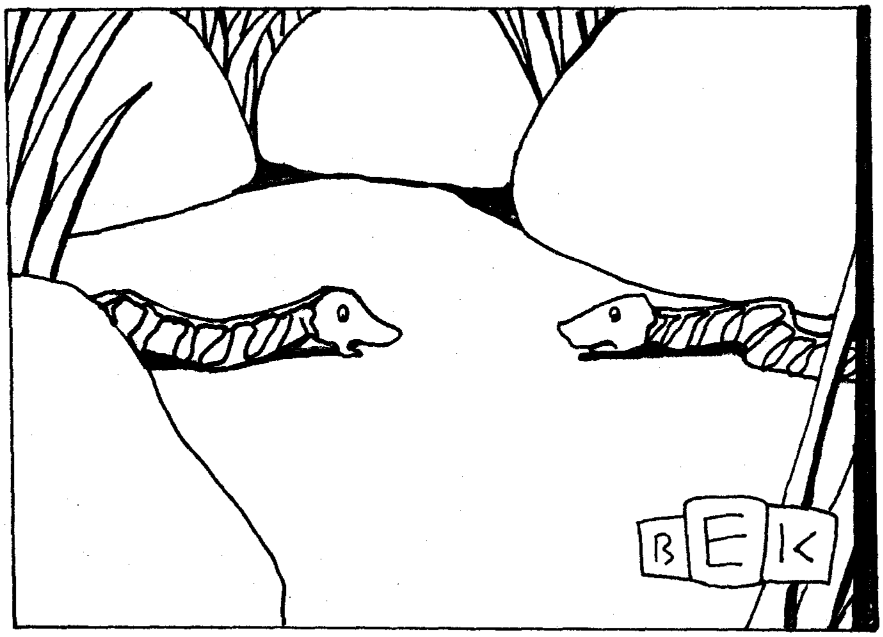
In spite of which, the next forty-eight hours go by in a placid sort of daze, which B's father associates with what he calls "the Idea of the Holiday." (B can't tell whether his father is serious or pulling his leg.) They go to the beach; they eat at the hotel or at a moderately priced restaurant on the Avenida López Mateos. One afternoon, they rent a boat, a small plastic rowboat, and follow the coastline near their hotel, along with the trinket venders who peddle their wares from beach to beach, travelling upright on surfboards or in very shallow-bottomed boats, like tightrope walkers or the ghosts of drowned sailors. On the way back, B and his father even have an accident.

B's father steers the boat too close to the rocks and it capsizes. In itself, this is not dramatic. Both of them can swim reasonably well and the boat is made to float when upside down; it isn't hard to right it and climb in again. And that is what B and his father do. Not the slightest danger at any point, B thinks. But when both of them have climbed back into the boat, B's father realizes that he has lost his wallet. Tapping his chest, he says, My wallet, and without hesitation he dives back into the water. B can't help laughing, but then, stretched out in the boat, he looks over the side, sees no sign of his father, and for a moment imagines him diving, or, worse, sinking like a stone, open-eyed, into a deep trench, above which, on the surface, in a rocking boat, his son has stopped laughing and begun to worry. Then B sits up and, having looked over the other side of the boat and seen no sign of his father there, either, jumps into the water, and this is what happens: as B goes down with his eyes open, his father is coming up (they almost touch), holding his wallet in his right hand. They look at each other as they pass, but can't alter their trajectories, or at least not right away, so B's father keeps ascending silently while B continues his silent descent.

For sharks—for most fish, in fact (flying fish excepted)—hell is the surface of the sea. For B (and many, perhaps most, young men of his age), it sometimes takes the form of the seafloor. As he follows in his father's wake, but heading in the opposite direction, the situation strikes him as particularly absurd. The bottom isn't sandy, as he had for some reason imagined it would be;



*"So how did you like getting away from it all?"*



*"You can hide, but you can't run."*

• •

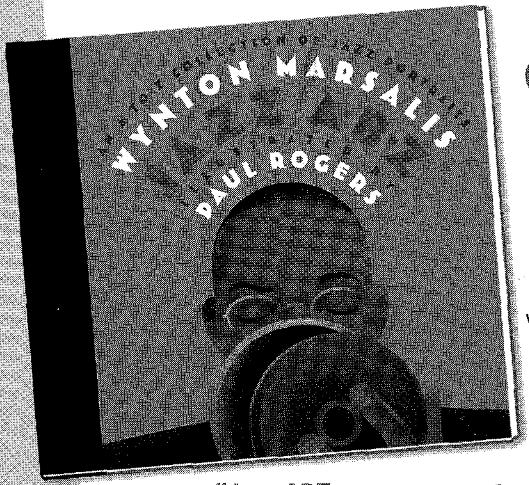
there are only rocks piled on top of one another, as if this part of the coast were a submerged mountain range and he were near a high peak, having hardly begun the descent. Then he starts to rise again, and looks up at the boat, which seems to be levitating one moment and about to sink the next; he finds his father sitting right in the middle, attempting to light a wet cigarette.

Then the lull comes to an end, the days of grace in the course of which B and his father have visited various bars in Acapulco, lain on the beach, and slept, eaten, and even laughed, and an icy phase begins, a phase that appears to be normal but is ruled by deities of ice (who do not, however, offer any relief from the heat that reigns in Acapulco); hours of what, in former days, when he was an adolescent, perhaps, B would have called boredom, although he would certainly not use that word now—disaster, he would call it, a private disaster whose main effect is to drive a wedge between B and his father, part of the price they must pay for existing.

It all begins with the reappearance of the ex-diver, who, as B realizes straightaway, has come looking for his father, and not for the family unit constituted by father and son. B's father invites the ex-diver to have a drink on the hotel terrace. The ex-diver says that he knows a better place. B's father looks at him, smiles, and says, O.K. As they go out into the street, the light is beginning to fade. B feels an inexplicable stab of pain and thinks that perhaps it would have been better to stay at the hotel and leave his father to his own devices. But it's already too late. The Mustang is heading up the Avenida Constituyentes, and from his pocket B's father takes the card that the receptionist gave him days ago. The night spot is called the San Diego, he says. In the ex-diver's opinion, it's too expensive. I've got money, B's father says. I've been living in Mexico since 1968, and this is the first time I've taken a vacation. B, who is sitting next to his father, tries to see the ex-diver's face in the rearview mirror, but can't. So first they go to the San Diego and for a while they drink and dance with the girls. For each dance, they have to give the girl a ticket bought beforehand at the bar. To begin with, B's father buys only three tickets. There's something unreal about this system, he says to the ex-diver. But then he starts enjoying himself and buys a whole bundle. B dances, too. His first dance partner is a slim girl with Indian features. The second is a woman with big breasts who seems to be preoccupied or angry for a reason that B will never discover. The third is fat and happy, and, after dancing for a little while, she whispers into B's ear that she's high. On what? B asks. Mushrooms, the woman says, and B laughs. Meanwhile, B's father is dancing with a girl who looks like an Indian and B is glancing across at him from time to time. Actually, all the girls look like Indians. The one dancing with his father has a pretty smile. They are talking (they haven't stopped talking, in fact), although B can't hear what they are saying. Then his father disappears and B goes to the bar with the ex-diver. They start talking, too. About the old days. About courage. About the cliffs where the ocean waves break. About women. Subjects that don't interest B, or at least not at the moment. But they talk anyway.

Half an hour later, his father comes back to the bar. His blond hair is wet and freshly combed (B's father combs his hair back), and his face is red. He smiles and says nothing; B observes him and says nothing. Time for dinner, B's father says. B and the ex-diver follow him back to the Mustang. They eat an assortment of shellfish in a place that's long and narrow, like a coffin. As they eat, B's father watches B as if he were searching for an answer. B looks back at him. He is sending a telepathic message: there is no answer, because it's not a valid question. It's an idiotic question. Then, before he knows what is going on, B is back in the car with his father and the ex-diver, who talk about boxing all the way to a place on the outskirts of Acapulco. It's a brick-and-wood building with no windows, and inside there's a jukebox with songs by Lucha Villa and Lola Beltrán. Suddenly, B feels nauseous. He leaves his father and the ex-diver and looks for the toilet or the back yard or the door to the street, belatedly realizing that he has had too much to drink. He also realizes that apparently well-meaning hands have prevented him from going out into the street. They don't want me to get away, B thinks. Then he vomits several times in the yard, among stacks of beer boxes, under the eye of a chained dog; having relieved himself, he looks up at the stars. A woman soon appears beside him. Her shadow is darker than the darkness of the night. If it weren't for her white dress, B could hardly have made her out. You want a blow job? she asks. Her voice is young and husky. B looks at her, uncomprehending. The whore kneels down beside him and undoes his fly. Then B understands and lets her proceed. When it's over, he feels cold. The whore stands up and B hugs her. Together they gaze at the night sky. When B says he's going back to his father's table, the woman doesn't follow him. Let's go, B says, but she resists. Then B realizes that he has hardly seen her face. It's better that way. I hugged her, he thinks, but I don't even know what she looks like. Before he goes in, he turns around and sees her walking over to pet the dog.

Inside, his father is sitting at a table with the ex-diver and two other guys. B comes up behind him and whispers in his ear: Let's go. His father is playing cards. I'm winning, he says, I can't leave now. They're going to steal all our money, B thinks. Then he looks at the women, who are looking at him and his father with commiseration in their eyes. They know what's going to happen to us, B thinks. Are you drunk? his father asks him, taking a card. No, B says, not anymore. Have you taken any drugs? his father asks. No, B says. Then his father smiles and orders a tequila. B gets up and goes to the bar, and from there he surveys the scene of the crime with manic eyes. It is clear to B now that he will never travel with his father again. He shuts his eyes; he opens his eyes. The whores watch him curiously; one offers him a drink, which B declines with a gesture. When he shuts his eyes, he keeps seeing his father with a pistol in each hand, entering through an impossibly situated door. In he comes, impossibly, urgently, with his gray eyes shining and his hair ruffled. This is the last time we'll travel together, B thinks. That's all there is to it. The jukebox is playing a Lucha Villa song and B thinks of Gui Rosey, a minor poet who disappeared in the South of France. His father deals the cards, laughs, tells stories, and listens to those of his companions, each more sordid than the last. B remembers going to his father's house when he returned from Chile in 1974. His father had broken his foot and was in bed reading a sports magazine. What was it like? he asked, and B recounted his adventures. An episode from the chronicle of Latin America's doomed revolutions. I almost got killed, he said. His father looked at him and smiled. How many times? he asked. Twice, at least, B replied. Now B's father is roaring with



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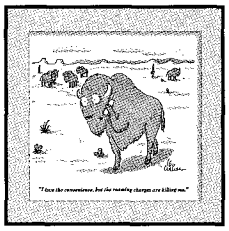
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laughter and B is trying to think clearly. Gui Rosey committed suicide, he thinks, or got killed. His corpse is at the bottom of the sea.

A tequila, B says. A woman hands him a half-full glass. Don't get drunk again, kid, she says. No, I'm all right now, B says, feeling perfectly lucid. Then two other women approach him. What would you like to drink? B asks. Your father's really nice, says the younger one, who has long black hair. Maybe she's the one who gave me the blow job, B thinks. And he remembers (or tries to remember) apparently disconnected scenes. The first time he smoked in front of his father: he was fourteen; it was a Viceroy cigarette; they were waiting in his father's truck for a freight train and it was a very cold morning. Stories of guns and knives, family stories. The whores are drinking tequila with Coca-Cola. How long was I outside vomiting? B asks himself. You were kind of jumpy before, one of the whores says. You want some? Some what? B says. He is shaking and his skin is cold as ice. Some weed, says the woman, who is about thirty years old and has long hair like the other one, but dyed blond. Acapulco Gold? B asks, taking a gulp of tequila, while the two women come a little closer and start stroking his back and his legs. Yup, calms you down, the blonde says. B nods, and the next thing he knows there is a cloud of smoke between him and his father. You really love your dad, don't you? one of the women says. Well, I wouldn't go that far, B says. What do you mean? the dark woman says. The woman serving at the bar laughs. Through the smoke, B sees his father turn his head and look at him for a moment. A deadly serious look, he thinks. Do you like Acapulco? the blonde asks. Only at this point does he realize that the bar is almost empty. At one table there are two men drinking in silence; at another, his father, the ex-diver, and the two strangers playing cards. All the other tables are empty.

The door to the yard opens and a woman in a white dress appears. She's the one who gave me the blow job, B thinks. She looks about twenty-five, but is probably much younger, maybe sixteen or seventeen. Like almost all the others, she has long hair, and is wearing shoes with very high heels. As she walks through the bar (toward the bathroom), B looks carefully at her shoes: they are white and smeared with mud on the sides. His father also looks up and examines her for a moment. B watches the whore opening the bathroom door, then he looks at his father. He shuts his eyes and when he opens them again the whore is gone and his father has turned his attention back to the game. The best thing for you to do would be to get your father out of this place, one of the women whispers in his ear. B orders another tequila. I can't, he says. The woman slides her hand up under his loose-fitting Hawaiian shirt. She's checking to see if I have a weapon, B thinks. The woman's fingers climb up his chest and close on his left nipple. She squeezes it. Hey, B says. Don't you believe me? the woman asks. What's going to happen? B asks. Something bad, the woman says. How bad? I don't know, but if I was you I'd get out of here. B smiles and looks into her eyes for the first time: Come with us, he says, taking a gulp of tequila. Not in a million years, the woman says. Then B remembers his father saying to him, before he left for Chile, "You're an artist and I'm a worker." What did he mean by that? he wonders. The bathroom door opens and the whore in the white dress comes out again, her shoes immaculate now, goes across to the table where the card game is happening, and stands there next to one of the strangers. Why? B asks. Why do we have to go? The woman looks at him out of the corner of her eye and says nothing. There are things you can tell people, B thinks, and things you just can't. He shuts his eyes.

As if in a dream, he goes back out to the yard. The woman with the dyed-blond hair leads him by the hand. I have already done this, B thinks; I'm drunk; I'll never get out of here. Certain gestures are repeated: the woman sits on a rickety chair and opens his fly, the night seems to float like a lethal gas among the empty beer boxes. But some things are missing: the dog has gone, for one, and in the sky, to the east, where the moon hung before, a few filaments of light herald dawn. When they finish, the dog appears, perhaps attracted by B's groans. He doesn't bite, the woman says, while the dog stands a few yards away, baring its teeth. The woman gets up and smoothes her dress.

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The fur on the dog's back is standing up and a string of translucent saliva hangs from his muzzle. Stay, Fang, stay, the woman says. He's going to bite us, B thinks as they retreat toward the door. What happens next is confused: At his father's table, all the card players are standing up. One of the strangers is shouting at the top of his voice. B soon realizes that the man is insulting his father. As a precaution, he orders a bottle of beer at the bar, which he drinks in long gulps, almost choking, before going over to the table. His father seems calm. In front of him are a considerable number of bills, which he is picking up one by one and putting in his pocket. You're not leaving here with that money, the stranger shouts. B looks at the ex-diver, trying to tell from his face which side he will take. The stranger's, probably, B thinks. The beer runs down his neck and only then does he realize that he is burning hot.

B's father finishes counting his money and looks at the three men standing in front of him and at the woman in white. Well, gentlemen, he says, we're leaving. Come over here, son. B pours what is left of his beer onto the floor and grips the bottle by the neck. What are you doing, son? B's father says. B can hear the tone of reproach in his voice. We're going to leave calmly, B's father says, then he turns around and asks the women how much they owe. The woman at the bar looks at a piece of paper and reads out a sizable sum. The blond woman, who is standing halfway between the table and the bar, says another figure. B's father adds them up, takes out the money and hands it to the blonde: What we owe you and the drinks. Then he gives her a couple more bills: the tip. Now we're going to leave, B thinks. The two strangers block their exit. B doesn't want to look at her, but he does: the woman in white has sat down in one of the vacant chairs and is examining the cards scattered on the table, touching them with her fingertips. Don't get in my way, his father whispers, and it takes a while for B to realize that he is speaking to him. The ex-diver puts his hands in his pockets. The one who was shouting before starts insulting B's father again, telling him to come back to the table and keep playing. The game's over, B's father says. For a moment, looking at the woman in white (who strikes him now, for the first time, as very beautiful), B thinks of Gui Rosey, who disappeared off the face of the earth, quiet as a lamb, without a trace, while Nazi hymns rose into a blood-red sky, and he sees himself buried in some vacant lot in Acapulco, vanished forever, but then he hears his father, who is accusing the ex-diver of something, and he realizes that unlike Gui Rosey he is not alone.

Then his father walks toward the door stooping slightly and B stands aside to give him room to move. Tomorrow we'll leave, tomorrow we'll go back to Mexico City, B thinks joyfully. And then the fight begins. ♦

(*Translated, from the Spanish, by Chris Andrews.*)

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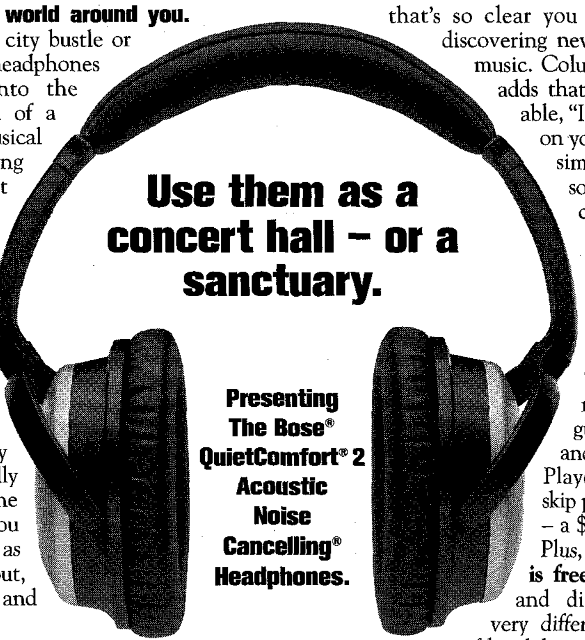
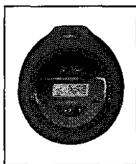


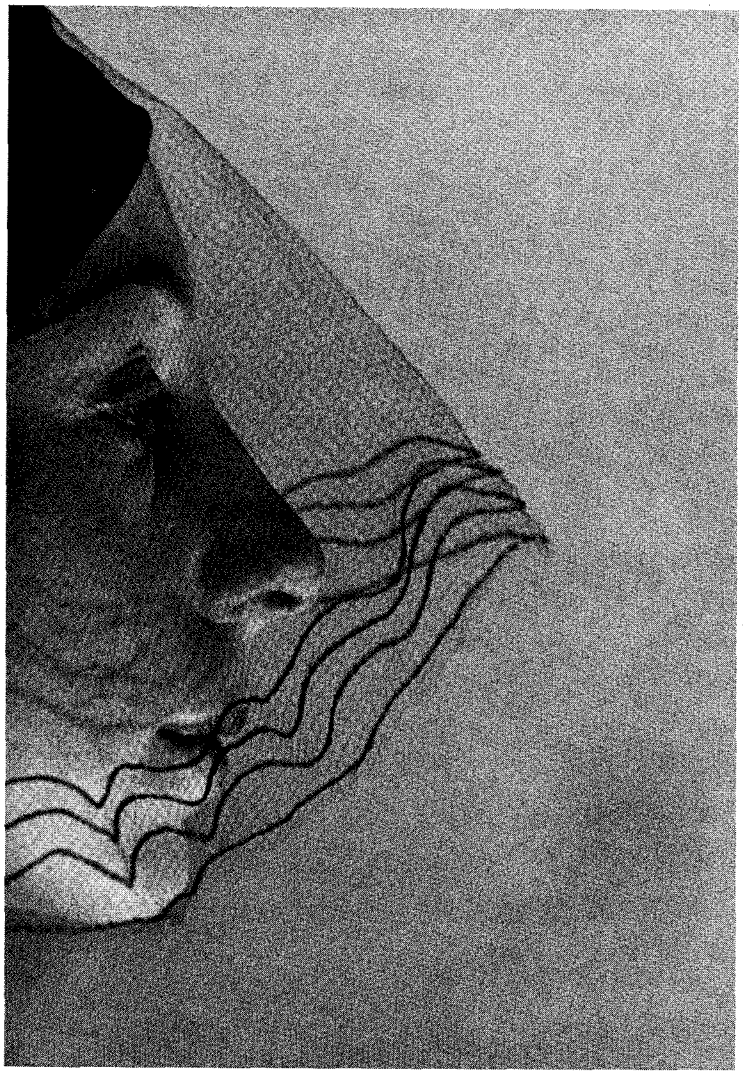


PERSONAL HISTORY

# YORICK

*Uncovering the bones of a grandmother's past.*

BY TATYANA TOLSTAYA



ERWIN BLUMENFELD/DEBORAH BELL PHOTOGRAPHS/ART + COMMERCE

On the windowsill of my childhood stood a dust-colored round tin with black letters printed on it: "Dorset. Stewed Pork." The tin served as a communal grave for all single buttons. Every now and then, a button would fall off a cuff, roll under the bed—and that was it. Grope as you might or run the broom under the bed, it was gone forever. Then the contents of "Dorset" would be shaken out on the table and picked over with one finger, like grains of buckwheat, in search of a pair, but of course nothing matching could ever be found. After a bit of hesitation, the other button would be snipped off—what can you do?—the orphan would be thrown into the pile, and a half-dozen new buttons wrapped in muddy, tea-colored waxed paper would be purchased at the variety store.

The tram ran outside the window, the glass rattled, the windowsill shook, and the minute population of "Dorset" jangled faintly, as though living its own cantankerous life. In addition to buttons, there were some old-timers in the tin: for instance, a set of needles from the foot-pedal Singer sewing machine that no one had used in so long that it gradually began to dissolve into the air of the room, thinning down into its own shadow before it finally vanished, though it had been a real beauty—black, with a ravishingly slender waist, a clear-cut gold sphinx printed on its shoulder, a gold wheel, a black rawhide drive belt, and a dangerous steel-toothed crevasse that plunged down into mysterious depths, where, shuddering, the shuttle went back and forth and did who knows what. Or there might be a crumbling scrap of paper in the tin, on which hooks and loops sat like black insects; as the paper died, the hooks fell to the bottom of the grave with a gentle *clink*. Or some metallic thingamabob resembling a dentist's instrument; no one knew what it was, because there were no dentists in our family. We'd fish out this cold, sharp object with two fingers: "Papa, what is this?" Papa would put on the spectacles that sat on his forehead, take it carefully, and inspect it. "Hard to say . . . It's . . . something."

The corpses of tiny objects, shells of sunken islands. One that constantly surfaced, fell to the bottom, and then surfaced again was a dull-white, bony blade, good for nothing. Of course, like everything else, no one ever threw it away. Then one time someone said, "That's whalebone, a whale whisker."

Whalebone! Whale whiskers! Instantly, monster whale-fishes came to mind, smooth black mountains in the gray, silvery-slow ocean sea. In the middle of the whale—a fountain like the ones at Petrodvorets, foamy water spouting on both sides. On the monster's face—small, attentive eyes and a long, fluffy mustache, totally Maupassant. But the encyclopedic dictionary writes, "Teeth are found only in so-called 'toothed-W.' (dolphins, narwhals, sperm W., and bottle-nosed W.), which feed mostly on fish; the whiskered, or baleen W. (gray W., right W., rorquals), has horny formations on the roof of the mouth, plates mistakenly called 'bones' or 'whiskers,' which serve to filter plankton." Not true, that is, they're not only for filtering. As late as 1914, a seamstress sewing a stylish dress for Grandmother reproached my absent-minded, happy-go-lucky ancestor, "Nowadays, Natalya Vasilevna, one can't circulate in society without a busk"; Grandmother was shamed and agreed to a straight busk. The seamstress grabbed a handful of "bones" that came from the mouth of a gray W., or perhaps it was a right W., or maybe even a rorqual, and sewed them into Grandmother's corset, and Grandmother circulated with great success, wearing under her bust, or at her waist, slivers of the seas, small pieces of those tender, pinkish-gray palates, and she passed through suites of rooms, slim and petite, a decadent Aphrodite with a heavy knot of dark-gold hair, rustling her silks, fragrant with French perfumes and fashionable Norwegian mists; heads turned to watch her, hearts pounded. She loved, rashly and dangerously, and married; then the war began, then the revolution, and she gave birth to Papa—on a day when a machine gun strafed through the fog—and she was anxious and barricaded the frosted window of the bathroom; she fled south, and ate grapes, and then the machine gun began blazing again, and again she fled, on the last steamship out of grapevined, bohemian Odessa, making her way to Marseilles, then to Paris. And she was hungry, poor, and humbled; now she herself sewed for the rich, crawled on her knees around their skirts, her mouth pursed to hold pins; she pinned hems and linings and despaired, and again she fled south (this time the South of France), imagining that she could not only eat grapes but make wine herself—you only have to stomp on them with your feet, it's called *vendange*—and then everyone would get rich again and everything would be like it used to be, absent-minded, lighthearted, carefree. But again she came to ruin most shamefully, ridiculously, and in August, 1923, she returned to Petrograd, her hair bobbed, wearing a new, stylishly short skirt and a mushroom-shaped cap, holding a much grown, frightened Papa by the hand. By that time, you could circulate in society without a busk, under different conditions. A lot of things circulated then.

To retell a life you need an entire life. We'll skip it. Later, perhaps, sometime or another.

I'm really thinking about the whale: how he dove into the cold Norwegian waters suspecting nothing, not a thought for the red-bearded northern fishermen; how he wasn't on his guard when he rose up to the gray surface of the sea, to the unextinguished yellow sunsets in the overflow of the northern waters, fair-haired girls, pines, stones, Grieg sonatas, to that sea sung by fashionable writers in the modern's minor key. He didn't need those baleens, those horny formations on his palate, those so-called whiskers or bones intended as an instrument for filtering plankton; the northern girls found a better use for them. A slender waist; luxuriant hair; a difficult love; a long life; children dragged by the hand across seas and continents. And then the end of war, then the victor's roar, and the Allies sent us tins of good stewed pork; we ate it and spat the bones, teeth, and whiskers into the empty containers. But it's the bottle-nosed whales that have the teeth, while ours, our very own, personal, gray, right, rorqual, our poor Yorick, didn't even eat fish, he didn't wrong any fishermen, he lived a radiant, short life—no, no, a long, long life, it continues even now and will continue as long as someone's uncertain, pensive fingers keep fishing out and tossing back, fishing out and tossing back into the tin on the shaking windowsill these hushed, stunning skull shards of time. Clench a fragment of Yorick in your fist—milky and chill—and the heart grows younger, pounds faster, and strains; the suitor wants to snatch the young lady, and water spouts like a fountain to all ends of the sea, and the world circulates, whirling, spinning, wanting to fall; it stands on three whales, and splits away from them into the head-spinning abyss of time. ♦

(*Translated, from the Russian, by Jamey Gambrell.*)

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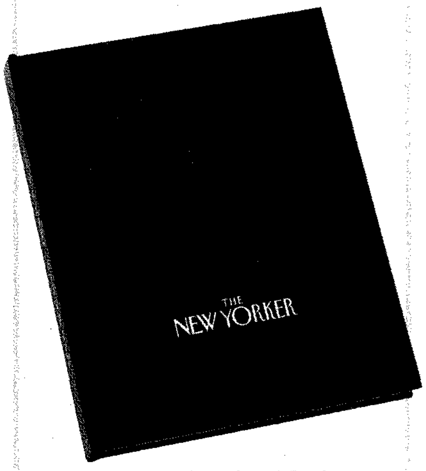

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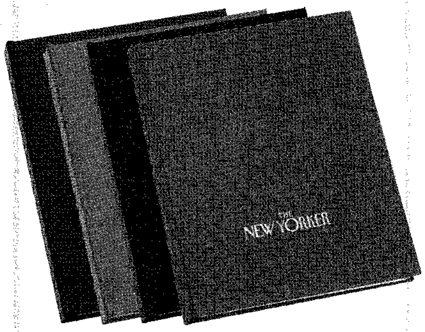

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FICTION

# PREGNANCY DIARY

BY YOKO OGAWA

*December 29 (Monday):* My sister went to the M Clinic today. Since she rarely goes to see anyone except Dr. Nikaido, she was nervous about the appointment. She'd put it off, worrying about what she should wear and how she should speak to the doctor, until it was the last day they'd be seeing patients this year. This morning, she was still fussing.

"I wonder how many months of temperature charts I should show them?" She looked up distractedly from the breakfast table but made no move to get up.

"Why not take all of them?" I answered.

"But that's two years' worth," she said, her voice rising as she churned her spoon in the yogurt. "Twenty-four charts, and only a few days that have anything to do with the pregnancy. I think I'll just show them this month's."

"Then what was the point of taking your temperature every day for two years?"

"I can't stand the thought of some doctor pawing through them right there in front of me, as if he were trying to find out every detail of how I got pregnant." She studied the yogurt clinging to her spoon. It shimmered, viscous and white, as it dripped back into the container.

"You're making too big a deal out of it," I said, covering the yogurt and putting it back into the refrigerator. "They're just charts."

In the end, she decided to show the doctor all the charts, but it took her some time to find them.

I'm not sure why, when she was meticulous about taking her temperature, she was so careless with the charts themselves. The sheets of graph paper, which should have been kept in her bedroom, would stray to the magazine rack or the telephone stand, and I'd suddenly come across them as I was flipping through the newspaper or making a phone call. I realize now that there was something odd about my finding these scraps of paper with their jagged lines and telling myself, "She must have ovulated then," or "Her basal temperature was low this month."

My sister had chosen the M Clinic for sentimental reasons. I'd tried to get her to go somewhere bigger and better equipped, but she had made up her mind. "When we were kids, I decided that if I ever had a baby I'd have it there," she said.

The M Clinic was a small private maternity hospital that had been around since our grandfather's day. When my sister and I were girls, we had often sneaked into the garden to play. From the front, the three-story wooden building was gloomy, with moss-covered walls, a half-faded sign, and frosted windows. But if you made your way to the garden around the back, it was bright and sunny. For some reason, this contrast thrilled us.

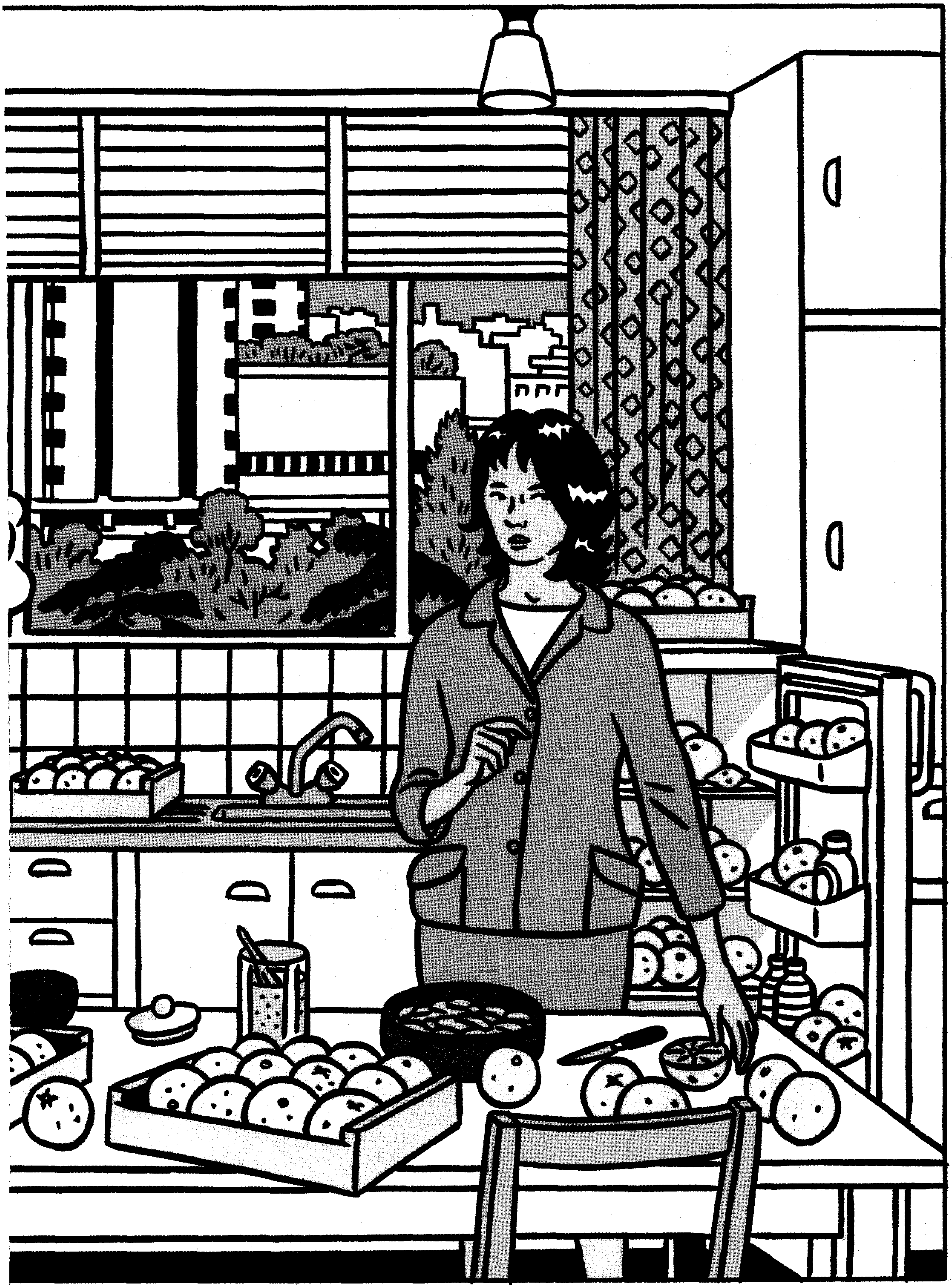
There was a carefully tended lawn behind the building, and we loved to roll down it. As I rolled, glimpses of green grass and dazzling sky alternated in my vision, blurring to a pale turquoise. Then the sky and the wind and the earth would recede for a moment and I felt as if I were floating in space. I loved that moment.

But our favorite pastime was spying on what was happening inside the clinic. Climbing on stacks of empty boxes that had once held gauze or cotton balls, we'd stare through the window into the examination room.

"We'll get in trouble if they catch us," I said. I was always more timid than my sister.

"Don't worry, they won't do anything. We're just kids," she'd say, calmly rubbing the glass with her sleeve to wipe away the condensation from our breath.

FLOCH



As we pressed our faces up against the window, we could smell the fresh white paint inside. That odor, like an ache deep in my head, still reminds me of the clinic after all these years.

The room was always empty at midday, before the afternoon appointments began, and we could study it to our hearts' content. A collection of bottles arranged on an oval tray seemed particularly mysterious. They had no caps or seals, just glass stoppers, which I felt an irresistible urge to pull out. The bottles had been stained brown or purple or deep red by the fluids they held, and when the sunlight shone through them the liquid seemed to glisten.

A stethoscope and some tongs and a blood-pressure cuff lay on the doctor's desk. The thin, twisting tube, the dull silver fittings, and the pear-shaped rubber bulb of the cuff made it look like a strange insect nestled among the other instruments. There was an odd beauty in the unintelligible letters printed on the medical charts. A poster on the wall read, "Position for use in treating breech presentation." In the picture, a woman was on her knees with her chest pressed against the floor. She was wearing a leotard that was so tight she looked naked. She lay there in the yellowed poster, staring vacantly into the distance. Then the chimes from a school somewhere in the neighborhood would start ringing, telling us that it was time for the afternoon examinations. We knew that we had to leave when we heard the nurses coming back from lunch.

Sometimes women would be looking out of the windows on the third floor. They had likely just given birth. They had on thick bathrobes and their hair was tied back in ponytails. None of them wore makeup. Wisps of hair floated around their temples, and their faces were expressionless. I wondered why they didn't seem happier at the prospect of sleeping above an examination room full of such fascinating objects.

My sister came back before noon, and I found her in the front hallway just as I was getting ready to leave for work.

"What did they say?"

"I'm in the second month—exactly six weeks."

"Can they really tell that precisely?"

"They can when they have all the charts," she said, pulling off her coat and hurrying past me. She didn't seem especially excited by the news. "What's for dinner?"

"Bouillabaisse," I said. "The clams and squid were cheap."

She had changed the subject so quickly that I completely forgot to congratulate her. But, then again, I wasn't quite sure that congratulations were appropriate for a baby who would be born to my sister and her husband. I looked up "congratulate" in the dictionary: it said "to wish someone joy."

"That doesn't mean much," I muttered, tracing my finger over a line of characters that held no promise of joy themselves.

*December 30 (Tuesday), 6 weeks + 1 day:* Since I was a little girl, I've disliked the thirtieth of December. I could always get through the thirty-first by telling myself that the year was finally over, but the thirtieth was confusing somehow, neither here nor there. Cooking the traditional New Year's dinner, cleaning the house, shopping—none of my tasks were completely done.

When my father and mother got sick and died, one right after the other, my ties to the New Year's season became even more tenuous. Nor did that change when my brother-in-law came to live with us. Still, breakfast this morning was a bit more relaxed than usual, since I didn't have classes and my brother-in-law's office was closed for the holiday.

"When you haven't had enough sleep, even the winter sun seems too bright," he said, squinting behind his glasses as he lowered himself into a chair. The light shining in from the garden fell on the table, and our three pairs of slippers cast long shadows across the floor.

"Were you out late?" I asked. He'd gone to the year-end party for the dental office where he works, and I must have been asleep by the time he got home.

"I caught the last train," he said. As he picked up his cup, a sweet smell wafted across the table. He puts so much cream and sugar into his coffee that the kitchen smells like a bakery at breakfast. I've often wondered how someone who makes bridges and dentures for a living can drink such sweet coffee without worrying about cavities. "The last train is worse than the rush-hour ones," he added. "It's always packed, and everyone's drunk." My sister scraped her butter knife over her toast.

Since her visit to the gynecologist yesterday, her pregnancy is now official, but she doesn't seem any different. Usually the least little thing—her favorite hair salon closing, the neighbor's old cat dying, a water-main break—is enough to get her completely agitated and send her running to see Dr. Nikaido.

I wonder how she broke the news to her husband. I don't really know what they talk about when I'm not around. In fact, I don't really understand couples at all. They seem like some sort of inexplicable gaseous body to me—a shapeless, colorless, unintelligible thing, trapped in a laboratory beaker.

"There's too much pepper in this," my sister muttered, sticking her fork into her omelette. Since she always has something to say about the food, I pretended not to hear her. Half-cooked egg dripped from the end of her fork like yellow blood. My brother-in-law was eating slices of kiwi. I can't stand kiwi—all those seeds make me think of little black bugs, and the kiwi this morning was particularly ripe and soft. Beads of sweat had collected on the surface of the butter.

Apparently, neither of them was anxious to bring up the subject of the pregnancy, so I didn't mention it, either. Birds were singing in the garden. A few wisps of cloud dissolved somewhere far off in the sky. The clatter of dishes alternated with the sound of chewing.

None of us seem to have realized that the year is almost over. There are no pine branches decorating the door, no black beans or *mochi* in the house. "I suppose we should at least do the cleaning," I said, as if talking to myself.

"You shouldn't overdo it in your condition," my brother-in-law said, turning to my sister as he licked the kiwi juice from his lips. It's just like him to say the most obvious thing as if it were a profound truth.

*January 8 (Thursday), 7 weeks + 3 days:* Her morning sickness has started. I had no idea it came on so suddenly. She’d been saying all along that she wouldn’t have it, that she hates that sort of cliché. She’s convinced, for instance, that hypnosis or anesthesia would never work on her. But we were eating macaroni and cheese for lunch when she suddenly held up her spoon and began staring at it.

“Does this spoon look funny?” she asked. It seemed perfectly normal to me.

“It smells weird,” she said, her nostrils flaring.

“Weird how?”

“I don’t know . . . like sand. Did you ever fall over in the sandbox when you were little? Like that, dry and rough.” She set the spoon back on her plate and wiped her mouth.

“Are you done?” I asked. She nodded and then rested her chin on her hands. The kettle began to whistle on the stove. She looked at me but said nothing, so I went on with my lunch.

*Yoko Ogawa, photographed in Asago, Japan, August, 2002.*

MASAAKI TOYOURA

“Doesn’t the sauce on the macaroni remind you of digestive juices?” she murmured. I ignored her and took a sip of water. “So warm and slimy? The way it globs together?” She bent forward and peered at me, her head cocked to one side. I tapped the end of my spoon on my plate. “And the color, does it look like lard? The noodles are strange, too. The way they squish when I bite into them makes me feel like I’m chewing on intestines, little slippery tubes full of stomach juices.” As I watched these words dribble out of her mouth, I fingered my spoon and thought how sad it was to see her like this. She went on talking until she had nothing else to say and then rose to go. The macaroni was a cold white lump on her plate.

*January 28 (Wednesday), 10 weeks + 2 days:* Her morning sickness is getting worse. She seems convinced that it will neither get slowly better nor disappear completely, and that depresses her. At any rate, she can’t eat anything. I’ve suggested just about every food imaginable, but she refuses everything. I even got out all the cookbooks in the house and went through them with her, but it didn’t help. I realize now that eating is actually an extremely delicate undertaking.

Still, her stomach is so empty it must ache, and she finally said that she needed to “put something in her mouth.” (She couldn’t bring herself to say “eat.”) She decided on a croissant. A waffle or some potato chips might have done just as well, but a croissant left over from breakfast happened to be peeking out of the bread basket. She tore off a piece, forced it into her mouth, and swallowed it almost without chewing. Then, to wash it down, she took a tiny sip from a can of sports drink, grimacing with disgust as she swallowed. It didn’t seem like eating at all, more like some magic rite or ritual.

My brother-in-law has been bringing home articles that he thinks will help: “How I Beat Morning Sickness” or “What Fathers Can Do for Morning Sickness.” It’s hard to believe, but the pregnancy seems to be affecting his appetite as well. At the table, he just pokes at his food and barely eats anything. “I can’t eat when she’s feeling so bad,” he says, sighing. She seems to think that he’s acting this way just to be nice, but I’ve noticed that when he’s massaging her back while she forces down a croissant he gets terribly pale and clutches his other hand to his mouth. They huddle together like a pair of injured birds and shuffle off to their bedroom, not to be seen again until morning.

My brother-in-law seems particularly pitiful to me, since he has no reason to feel sick, and I find myself getting angry over his little sighs and whimpers. It occurs to me that I’d fall in love with the kind of man who could put away a three-course French dinner even when he knew I was paralyzed by morning sickness.

*February 6 (Friday), 11 weeks + 4 days:* I eat all my meals alone now. I take my time, looking out at the flower beds or the shovel abandoned in the garden or the clouds floating by. I enjoy these quiet moments, and sometimes I even have a beer at lunch or smoke a cigarette, which my sister hates. I’m not lonely. Eating by myself seems to suit me. But this morning, as I was frying some bacon and eggs, she came running down the stairs.

"What's that awful smell?" she screamed, tearing at her hair. "Can't you *do* something?" She seemed ready to burst into tears. The bare feet protruding from the legs of her pajamas looked icy and as transparent as glass. She switched off the burner, nearly ripping the knob from the stove.

"It's just bacon and eggs," I whispered.

"Then why is the whole house filled with that disgusting smell? Butter, grease, eggs, pork—I can't breathe!" Putting her head down on the table, she began to sob. I didn't know what to do, so I turned on the exhaust fan and opened a window.

By this time, she was crying in earnest. It was remarkable to watch, almost like a scene from a play. Her hair hung down over her face, and her shoulders heaved. I put my hand on her back to comfort her.

"You have to do something!" she said between sobs. "When I woke up my whole body was filled with that awful stench. It's in my mouth and my lungs. My insides feel like they're coated with it."

"I'm sorry," I said timidly. "I'll try to be more careful."

"It's not just the bacon and eggs. It's the frying pan and the dishes, the soap in the bathroom, the curtains in the bedroom—everything stinks. It's spreading all over the house, like a giant amoeba eating up all the other odors around it, on and on forever." She sat there weeping, her tear-covered face resting on the table, and I stood, my hand still on her back, studying the check pattern on her pajamas. The motor on the exhaust fan sounded louder than usual.

"I know, I know," I murmured. I took a deep breath, but I couldn't smell anything at all. Just the kitchen in the morning. The coffee cups were lined up neatly in the cupboard. The white dishtowels were drying on the rack. A patch of frozen blue sky was visible through the window.

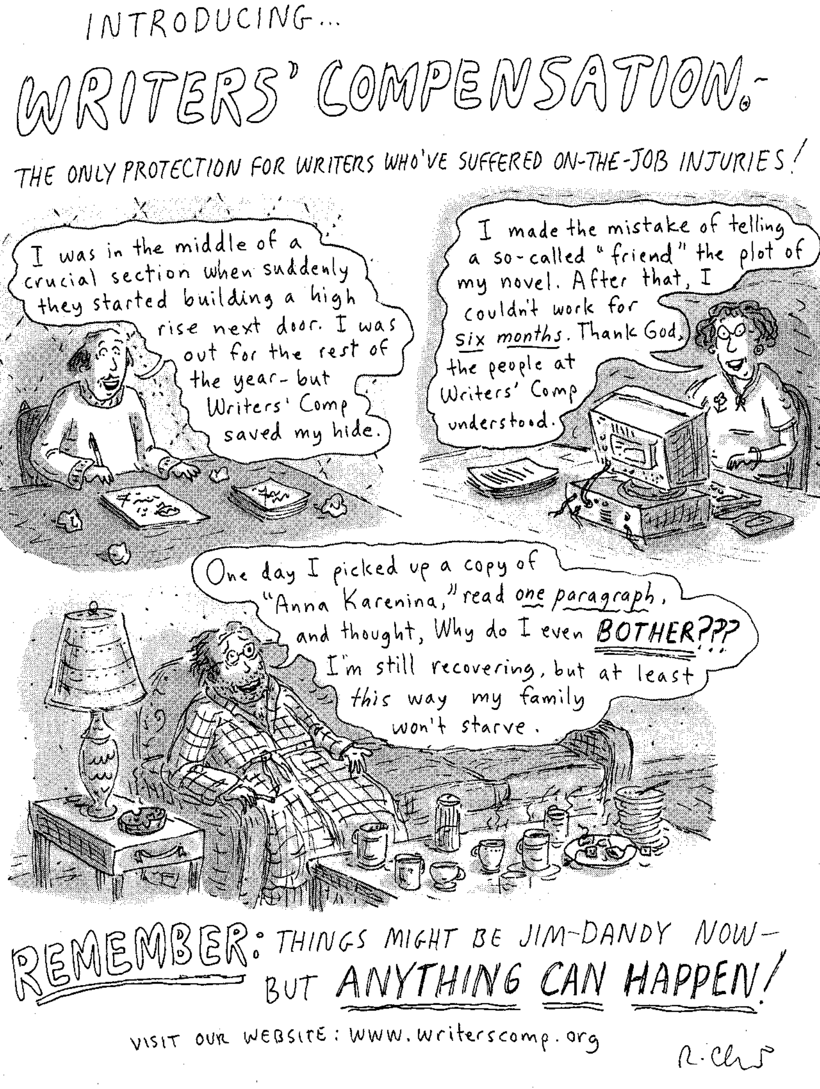
I have no idea how long she cried. It might have been only a few minutes, but it seemed much longer. In any case, she cried until she couldn't cry anymore. Then she let out a long, slow breath and looked up at me. Her cheeks and eyelashes were damp with tears, but her expression was calm.

"From now on, I won't use the kitchen when you're here," I said. She nodded. My cold bacon and eggs lay quietly in the pan.

*February 10 (Tuesday), 12 weeks + 1 day:* Twelve weeks—and the morning sickness is as bad as ever. It clings to her like a wet blouse. Which may be why she went to see Dr. Nikaido today. Her nerves and her hormones and her emotions seem all out of whack. As she always does before these visits, she spent a long time deciding what to wear. She lined up all her coats and skirts, her sweaters and scarves on the bed and studied them carefully. She also spent a lot of time on her makeup. I worry that all this fuss will make my brother-in-law jealous. The morning sickness has made her hips narrower, her cheeks a little sunken, and her jaw more defined; she's prettier than ever. You'd never guess that she was pregnant.

I met Dr. Nikaido once, when he brought her home during a typhoon. He's a middle-aged man with an unremarkable face and he made no impression on me at all. In fact, afterward I couldn't recall a single feature—thick earlobes, for example, or strong fingers—nothing. He just stood quietly behind my sister, looking down at the ground. Perhaps because his shoulders and hair were wet from the rain, he seemed terribly sad.

I don't really know what kind of therapy he practices, but my sister has mentioned psychological tests and medication of some sort. In any case, she's been going to see him since she was in high school, more than ten years now without a break, but I can't see that she's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got any better. Her emotional problems seem to come in waves, like seaweed tossed around in the ocean, and she's never found a safe shore to rest on. Still, she told me that she feels much better when she's at his office.

"It's like when they're shampooing your hair at the salon," she said. "The feeling that someone's taking care of you—it's wonderful." Her eyes narrowed with pleasure at the thought of him.

But it's hard for me to believe that Dr. Nikaido is a good psychiatrist. As he stood mutely in the doorway on the night of the typhoon, he looked more like a frightened patient than a doctor.

The sun had set and a golden moon had risen in the darkness, but she still hadn't come home. "She shouldn't be out in this cold," my brother-in-law muttered. When a taxi finally stopped at the gate, he hurried out to meet her. Her eyes glistened as she unwound her scarf, and she seemed much calmer than she was this morning. But no matter how often she goes to see Dr. Nikaido her morning sickness is as bad as ever.

*March 1 (Sunday), 14 weeks + 6 days:* It suddenly occurred to me that I haven't been thinking about the baby. I suppose I should be wondering whether it's a boy or a girl, what they'll name it, what sort of baby clothes to buy. I imagine people usually enjoy thinking about those kinds of things. But my sister and her husband never talk about the baby in front of me. They act as if there's no connection between the pregnancy and the fact that there's a baby in her belly. Which may explain why it has no concrete existence for me.

At the moment, I use the word "chromosome" to help me remember that there's actually a baby in there. "Chromosome" helps me give it some kind of form. I once saw a picture of chromosomes in a science magazine. They looked like pairs of butterfly cocoons lined up in a row. They were oblong, and just the right size and shape to pinch in your fingers. The pairs were all different: some were curved at the ends like a cane, others were perfectly straight and parallel, and others were backed up against each other like Siamese twins. When I think about my sister's baby, I count off those twin cocoons in my head.

*March 14 (Saturday), 16 weeks + 5 days:* She hardly looks pregnant at all, even though she's entering her fifth month. For weeks now, she's consumed nothing but croissants and sports drinks, and she's losing a lot of weight. Except for her visits to the clinic and to Dr. Nikaido, she stays in bed all day, as if she were seriously ill.

About the only thing I can do for her is avoid creating any kind of odor; so I've changed every bar of soap in the house to an unscented brand, and I took the paprika and thyme and sage from the spice rack and put them in a tin. I moved all the makeup that was in her room to mine, and, since she'd started complaining about the smell of the toothpaste, my brother-in-law went out and bought a waterpick. Needless to say, I try not to cook when she's around. But, if I absolutely have to make something, I take the rice cooker or the microwave or the coffee grinder out to the garden and spread a mat on the ground.

It's peaceful eating outside by myself, looking up at the night sky. The evenings are warmer now that spring is almost here, and the air feels soft. My hands and feet pressed against the mat are dull and numb, but everything else—the crape myrtle, the bricks lining the flower beds, the twinkling stars—is sharp and clear. Except for a dog barking in the distance, the evening is perfectly still.

I plug the rice cooker into the extension cord I've strung out from the kitchen, and within a few minutes a cloud of steam rises from the vent and vanishes into the darkness. A packet of instant stew warms in the microwave. From time to time, a light breeze blows, rustling the leaves and carrying away the vapor.

I eat more slowly when I'm in the garden. The cups and dishes set out on the mat are all at slightly different angles. As I serve myself the stew, being careful not to spill it, I feel as though I were playing house. A faint light is burning in my sister's window on the second floor. I think about her, curled up in bed, surrounded by all those odors, and then I open my mouth wide to take in the darkness with my bite of stew.

*March 31 (Tuesday), 19 weeks + 1 day:* I got up early today, since the supermarket I had to go to for my part-time job was quite far away. It was foggy, and my eyelashes were cold and damp by the time I reached the station.

The job suits me because my boss always sends me to a different supermarket in an unfamiliar part of town, and I never go to the same place twice. The supermarket is usually situated on a little plaza in front of a train station, with a pedestrian crossing, bicycle racks, and a bus terminal nearby. As I watch people come into the store, I feel as though I'd gone away somewhere on a trip.

At the service entrance, I flash my ID card from the employment agency and the guard nods gruffly. It's depressing in the back, with boxes and wet sheets of plastic and bits of vegetable littering the floor. The fluorescent lights are dim. I wander through the store with my bag full of equipment, looking for the best place to set up. Today, I chose a spot between the meat counter and the frozen-food cases.

First, I made a stand by stacking some boxes from the storeroom. Then I covered it with a floral-print tablecloth and set out a plate. I put crackers on the plate, took my electric beater from the bag, and began whipping the cream.

The store had just been renovated, so the floor was spotless and everything seemed to shine. I spooned little dabs of whipped cream onto the crackers and offered them to customers as they passed by. I always repeat the sales pitch exactly as it's printed in the manual from the agency: "Please try some. It's on sale today. What could be better with your favorite homemade cake?" I rarely say anything else.

All sorts of people passed by my stand—a lady in sandals, a young man in a sweatsuit, a Filipino woman with frizzy hair. Some of them took a cracker from my plate and ate it. Some walked by with a skeptical look, and others put a carton of cream into their basket without saying anything. I gave them all the same smile. My salary has nothing to do with how many cartons I sell, so it seems easiest to be pleasant to everyone.

The shoppers passed by me, baskets in hand, as if bobbing along on a stream of groceries. It occurred to me that almost everything in the store was edible, and this seemed sinister. There was something disturbing about so many people converging on one spot in search of food. And then I remembered my sister, and the way her sad eyes stared at a tiny morsel of croissant, how she seemed on the verge of tears as she swallowed and white crumbs scattered forlornly across the table.

*April 16 (Thursday), 21 weeks + 3 days:* My sister put on a maternity dress for the first time today. Her belly suddenly seemed larger, but when she let me touch it I could tell that it hadn't changed. I found it difficult to believe that there was a living being there under my hand. She seemed to be having a hard time getting used to the dress and kept fiddling with the ribbon around her waist.

But her morning sickness has vanished, ending just as abruptly as it began. Since the nausea started, she'd avoided the kitchen completely, so I was puzzled when I found her leaning against the counter this morning, after saying goodbye to her husband.

Because we haven't been cooking, the kitchen was spotless. Every utensil had been put away, the counter was clean and dry, and the dishwasher was empty. It seemed cold and forbidding, like a showroom. She looked around for a moment and then sat down at the table. Normally, it would have been cluttered with bottles and containers we'd forgotten to put away, but today there was nothing on it. She looked up at me as if she had something to say. The hem of her dress swirled around her ankles.

"Would you like a croissant?" I said, trying to be as discreet as possible.

"Please don't even say that horrible word," she said. I nodded obediently. "But I would like to try something else," she continued, almost whispering.

"Sure," I said. I hurried to the refrigerator, realizing that this was the first time in weeks that she'd expressed any interest in food. But there was absolutely nothing in there, just a bare light bulb illuminating the emptiness. I closed the door with a sigh and went to look in the pantry, but there was nothing there, either.

## PERSPECTIVE

They passed like strangers,
without a word or gesture,
her off to the store,
him heading for the car.

Perhaps startled
or distracted,
or forgetting
that for a short while
they'd been in love forever.

Still, there's no guarantee
that it was them.
Maybe yes from a distance,
but not close up.

I watched them from the window,
and those who observe from above
are often mistaken.

She vanished beyond the glass door.
He got in behind the wheel
and took off.
As if nothing had happened,
if it had.

And I, sure for just a moment
that I'd seen it,
strive to convince you, O Readers,
with this accidental little poem
that it was sad.

—*Wislawa Szymborska*

(*Translated, from the Polish, by Stanislaw Baranczak and Clare Cavanagh.*)

"Don't you have anything?" she said, sounding worried.

"Let's see," I said, sorting through the bags and cans and jars. "There's a little gelatin, half a sack of flour, some dried mushrooms, red food coloring, yeast, vanilla extract. . . ." I came across two leftover croissants, but I quickly put them back.

"But I want to eat something," she said, as if making a momentous decision.

"Hold on. There must be something around here." I checked the pantry again, shelf by shelf. At the very bottom, I found some raisins we'd once bought for a cake. The date on the box said that they were more than two years old, and they were as dried out as a mummy's eyeballs. "How about these?" I asked, pushing the bag toward her. She nodded.

It was strange to watch her eat something so hard with such a satisfied expression. Her jaw worked quickly as she took handful after handful from the bag. Her whole mind and body seemed to be concentrated on eating. When she came to the last few raisins, she let them rest on her palm for a moment, studying them lovingly before slowly putting them into her mouth. That was when I understood that her morning sickness was gone.

*May 1 (Friday), 23 weeks + 4 days:* In the past ten days my sister has gained back the ten pounds she lost during fourteen weeks of morning sickness. Now she seems to have something edible in her hand at every waking moment. If she's not at the table for a meal, she's clutching a bag of pastries, or looking for the can opener, or poking around in the refrigerator. It's as if her whole being had been swallowed up by her appetite.

She eats all the time, almost as a reflex, like breathing. Her eyes are clear and expressionless, fixed somewhere off in space. Her lips move vigorously, like the thighs of a sprinter. But for me very little has changed; it's just like when she was sick all the time—all I can do is sit back and watch.

*May 28 (Thursday), 27 weeks + 3 days:* The more my sister eats, the more her belly grows. The swelling starts just below her breasts and continues down to her lower abdomen. When she let me touch it, I was surprised at how hard it was. And it isn't perfectly symmetrical; it lists slightly to one side. That, too, was something of a shock.

"This is about the time that the eyelids separate," she told me. "If the fetus is a boy, the genitals are starting to descend from the abdominal cavity." Her tone, as she described the baby, was cool. And there was something disturbing about the words she used—"fetus," "genitals," "abdominal cavity"—something that seemed inappropriate for an expectant mother. As I watched her belly, I wondered whether the chromosomes in there were normal, whether the cocoons were wriggling somewhere deep inside her.

There was a little accident at the supermarket where I was working today. One of the stock boys slipped on a piece of lettuce and broke a whole cart full of eggs. It happened right next to where I was doing my demonstration, so I saw it all at close range. There were broken eggs and slimy smears of yellow all over the floor. The tread mark from the boy's sneaker was still visible on the lettuce leaf. And several cartons landed in the fruit section, covering the apples and melons and bananas with dripping egg white.

After the accident, the manager gave me a big bag of grapefruits that he said he couldn't sell, and I was happy to take them home since there never seems to be enough food at our house these days. When I put them out on the table in the kitchen, I noticed that they still smelled slightly of egg. They were big yellow grapefruits, imported from America, and I decided to make them into jam.

It was hard work peeling them all and getting the fruit out of the sections. My sister and her husband had gone out for Chinese food. Night was falling, and the house was silent except for the occasional tapping of the knife against the pot, a grapefruit rolling across the table, or my quiet cough. My fingers were sticky from the juice. The light in the kitchen illuminated the grainy pattern of the fruit. The grapefruits became even shinier when the sugar I had sprinkled on them dissolved. I dropped the pretty, crescent-shaped sections into a pot, one after another.

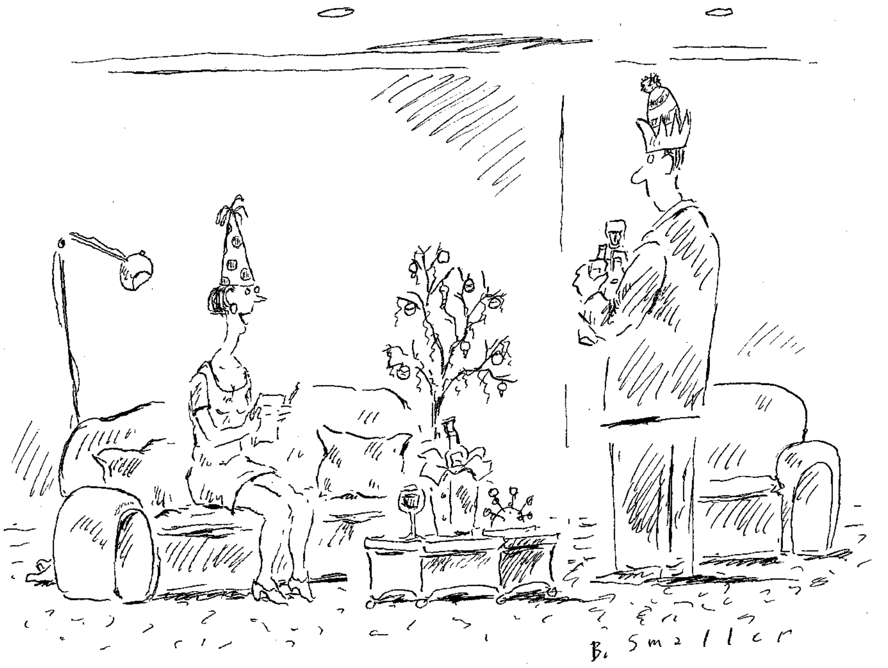
The thick rinds strewn across the table were somehow comical. I cut the pith away and shredded the zest before dropping it into the pot. Yellow juice spurted everywhere, covering the knife, the cutting board, my hands. The zest, too, had a neat, regular pattern, like a human membrane seen under a microscope.

Finally, I turned on the stove and sat down to rest. The sound of simmering grapefruit drifted out into the night. Clouds of sour steam billowed from the pot. As I watched the fruit dissolve, I remembered a meeting that some fellow-students had dragged me to a few months earlier. The title of the program was "Pollution: Our Earth, Our Bodies." There weren't many people there, but they seemed a sincere little group. As an outsider, I sat at a desk in the corner and stared out the window at a row of poplars lining the quadrangle.

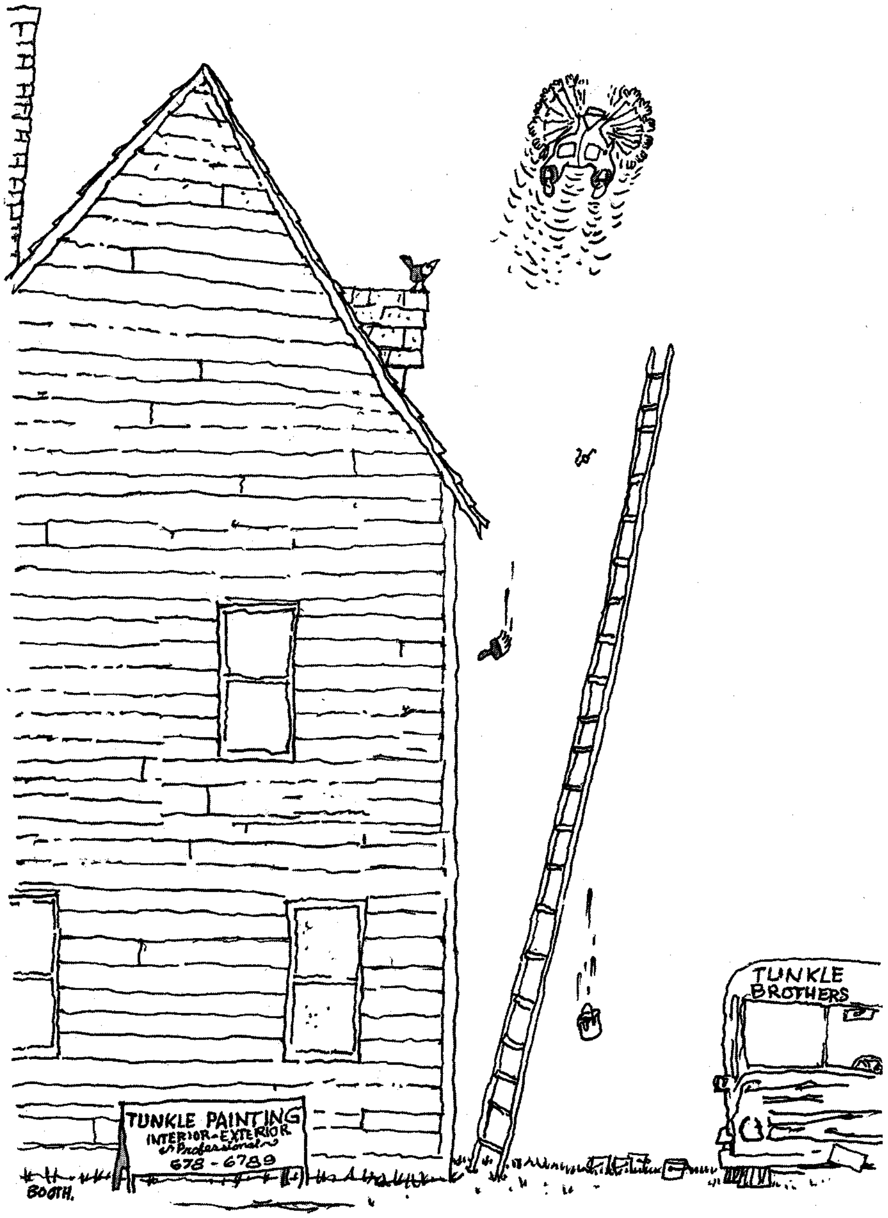
A thin woman wearing old-fashioned glasses made a presentation about acid rain, and then there were several complicated questions. As I pretended to listen, I fidgeted with the pamphlet they had handed to me on the way in. On the first page, there was a picture of an American grapefruit with a caption in bold print: "Beware of imported fruit! Antifungal P.W.H. is highly carcinogenic and has been shown to destroy human chromosomes!" That caption came back to me now in the kitchen.

The fruit and rind had dissolved into a smooth liquid dotted with little gelatinous lumps, and I had just turned off the stove when my sister and her husband came home. She came straight into the kitchen.

"What is that incredible smell?" she said, peering into the pot. "Grapefruit jam—how wonderful!" She had barely finished speaking before she had a spoon



*"I've finished my New Year's resolutions, and now I'm going to get a running start on yours."*



in her hand and was scooping up the hot jam. Still clutching her handbag, in her new maternity dress and best earrings, she stuffed the spoon into her mouth. Her husband stood watching from the doorway.

She ate spoonful after spoonful. Her protruding belly made her look almost arrogant as she stood there by the stove, pouring the sticky globs of fruit down her throat. As I studied the last puddles of jam trembling slightly at the bottom of the pan, I wondered whether P.W.H. would really destroy chromosomes.

*June 15 (Monday), 30 weeks + 0 days:* Monsoon season has started and it's been raining almost every day. It's dark and gloomy, and we have to keep the lights on all the time. The sound of the rain echoes constantly in my ears, and it's so cold that I've started to wonder if summer will ever come.

But there has been no change in my sister's appetite, and fat is beginning to accumulate in her cheeks and neck, her fingers and ankles. Thick, soft fat.

I feel a little disoriented every time I see her like this. Her whole body is swelling before my eyes like a giant tumor.

And I'm still making my jam. Grapefruits are piled all over the kitchen—in the fruit basket, on the refrigerator, next to the spice rack. I peel them, dig out the fruit, sprinkle it with sugar, and simmer it gently over a low flame. Then, before I can get the jam into a bowl, she eats it. She sits at the table, cradling the pot in her arm and working her spoon. She doesn't bother to spread it on bread or anything else. From the motion of the spoon and the movement of her jaw, you'd think she was eating something hearty and nourishing, like curry and rice. It's a strange way to eat jam.

The acid odor of the fruit mixes with the smell of the rain. She hardly seems to notice me, but I sit there anyway and watch her eat. "Won't you upset your stomach if you eat too much?" I murmur. Or, "Haven't you had enough?" Still no response. My voice is drowned out by the sound of the jam dissolving on her tongue or the drumming of the rain. Finally, when she has licked the last spoonful clean, she glances up at me with a sweet, dreamy look.

"Is there any more?" she murmurs.

"I'll make more tomorrow," I say, my voice flat and expressionless. And then, when I've cooked every last grapefruit in the house, I buy a new bag at the supermarket where I go to work. I always make sure to ask the man in the fruit department whether they're imported from America.

*July 2 (Thursday), 32 weeks + 3 days:* It's almost the ninth month already. My sister came home from the M Clinic today looking a bit depressed. It seems that they warned her about gaining too much weight.

"I had no idea the birth canal could get fat," she said. "They said that women who put on too much weight can have difficult deliveries." She seemed irritated as she pulled out the notebook she'd been using to keep track of the pregnancy. I could see that someone had written "Weight restriction" in bright red letters on one page. "They told me that I should only gain about twenty-five pounds by the end of the pregnancy. No doubt about it, I'm in trouble." She ran her hand through her hair and sighed. She has already gained close to forty-five pounds.

"I don't suppose there's anything you can do about it," I muttered, glancing at her swollen fingers as I headed into the kitchen to make more jam. Because, without my really thinking about it, making grapefruit jam has become something of a habit. I make it and she eats it, as easily and naturally as you brush your hair when you get up in the morning. "Are you really afraid of having a difficult delivery?" I asked, without looking up from the counter.

"Of course," she said, her voice thin and faint. "These past few days I've been thinking a lot about pain—trying to imagine the worst pain I've ever felt, whether labor pains are more like terminal cancer or like having both legs amputated—that sort of thing. But it's pretty hard to visualize pain, and not much fun trying."

"I can imagine," I said, peeling fruit. She was clutching her notebook. The picture of a baby on the cover was warped and the child seemed to be crying.

"But it's even more frightening to think about meeting the baby," she said. Her gaze dropped to her swollen belly. "I just can't believe that this thing in here is really my baby. It still seems so vague and abstract. But I know there's no way I can escape it. In the morning, when I'm just waking up, there's always a moment when I'm sure that it's all a dream—the morning sickness, the clinic, this belly, everything. It makes me feel wonderfully free. But then I look down at myself and I know it's real. I'm filled with sadness, and I realize that what scares me most is the thought of meeting my own baby."

I listened without turning to look at her. Lowering the heat on the stove, I stirred a big spoon through the pot. "It's nothing to be afraid of. A baby is just a baby. They're soft and cuddly, with little curled-up fingers, and they cry a lot. That's all." I stared down at the jam curling around the spoon.

"But it's not that simple. Once it's born, it's mine whether I want it or not. And there's nothing I can do about it, even if it has a birthmark covering half its face, or its fingers are stuck together, or it has no brain, or it's Siamese twins. . . ." She went on for some time listing awful possibilities. The spoon made a dull sound scraping the bottom of the pan as the jam began to congeal.

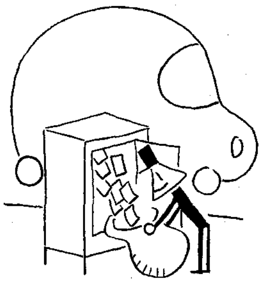
I stared into the pot, wondering how much P.W.H. it contained. Under the fluorescent light, the jam reminded me of a chemical, something in a clear bottle, perfect for dissolving chromosomes.

"It's done," I said. Gripping the handles of the pot, I turned to face her. "Here, have some." I held it out to her and she looked at it for a moment. Then, without another word, she started to eat.

*July 22 (Wednesday), 35 weeks + 2 days:* I've tried to think of the baby as something positive for my sister and her husband, and for me. But I never quite manage. I just can't imagine the look in my brother-in-law's eyes when he holds the baby in his arms, or the whiteness of my sister's breasts when she's nursing it. All I see is that photograph of chromosomes I once found in a science magazine.

*August 11 (Tuesday), 38 weeks + 1 day:* When I got back from work there was a note from my brother-in-law on the table: "The contractions have started. We've gone to the clinic." I read these few words over and over. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see a spoon coated with jam lying on the table. I tossed it into the sink and thought about what I should do. Then I read the note one more time and left the house.

Everything was bathed in light. The windshields of the cars in the street seemed to glow, and the spray from the fountain in the park sparkled. I walked along, staring at the ground and mopping the sweat from my face. Two children in straw hats ran past. The gate to the elementary school was closed and the playground was empty. Farther on there was a small florist's, but I saw no sign of a salesperson or any customers. A tiny bunch of baby's breath lay in the glass case.



I turned the corner and found myself in front of the M Clinic. Just as my sister had said, time seemed to have stopped here, and the clinic was exactly as it had been preserved in my memory for all those years—the big camphor tree next to the gate, the frosted glass in the front door, the peeling letters on the sign. Here, too, there was no one in sight, only my shadow clearly etched on the street.

I followed the wall around to the back of the building and slipped through the old broken gate into the garden. My heart started to pound the moment I set foot on the carefully tended grass, just as it always had. I looked up at the clinic, shielding my eyes from the glare of the sun reflected in the windows.

As I approached the building, the smell of paint drifted toward me. The air was still, and there was no sign of life around me. I was the only thing moving in the garden. I was tall enough now to look into the examination room without standing on a box, but there were no doctors or nurses to be seen. It was dark and deserted, like a science classroom after school gets out. I stood looking in at the bottles of medicine, the blood-pressure cuff, the breech-birth poster, the ultrasound monitor. The glass was warm against my face.

I thought I heard a baby crying in the distance. A tiny, trembling, tear-soaked cry coming from somewhere beyond the blaze of sunlight. As I listened, the sound seemed to be absorbed directly into my eardrums, and my head began to ache. I stepped back and looked up at the third floor. I saw a woman in a nightgown staring off into the distance. Her hair fell across her cheeks and her face was obscured in shadow, so I wasn't sure if it was my sister. Her lips were parted slightly and she was blinking—the way you blink when you're close to tears. I would have gone on watching her, but the angle of the sun shifted and she disappeared into the reflection.

Following the baby's cries, I climbed the fire escape. The wooden stairs groaned under my feet. My body felt limp and warm, but the hand that gripped the railing and the ears absorbing the baby's cries were strangely cool. As the lawn slowly receded beneath me, its green became even more brilliant.

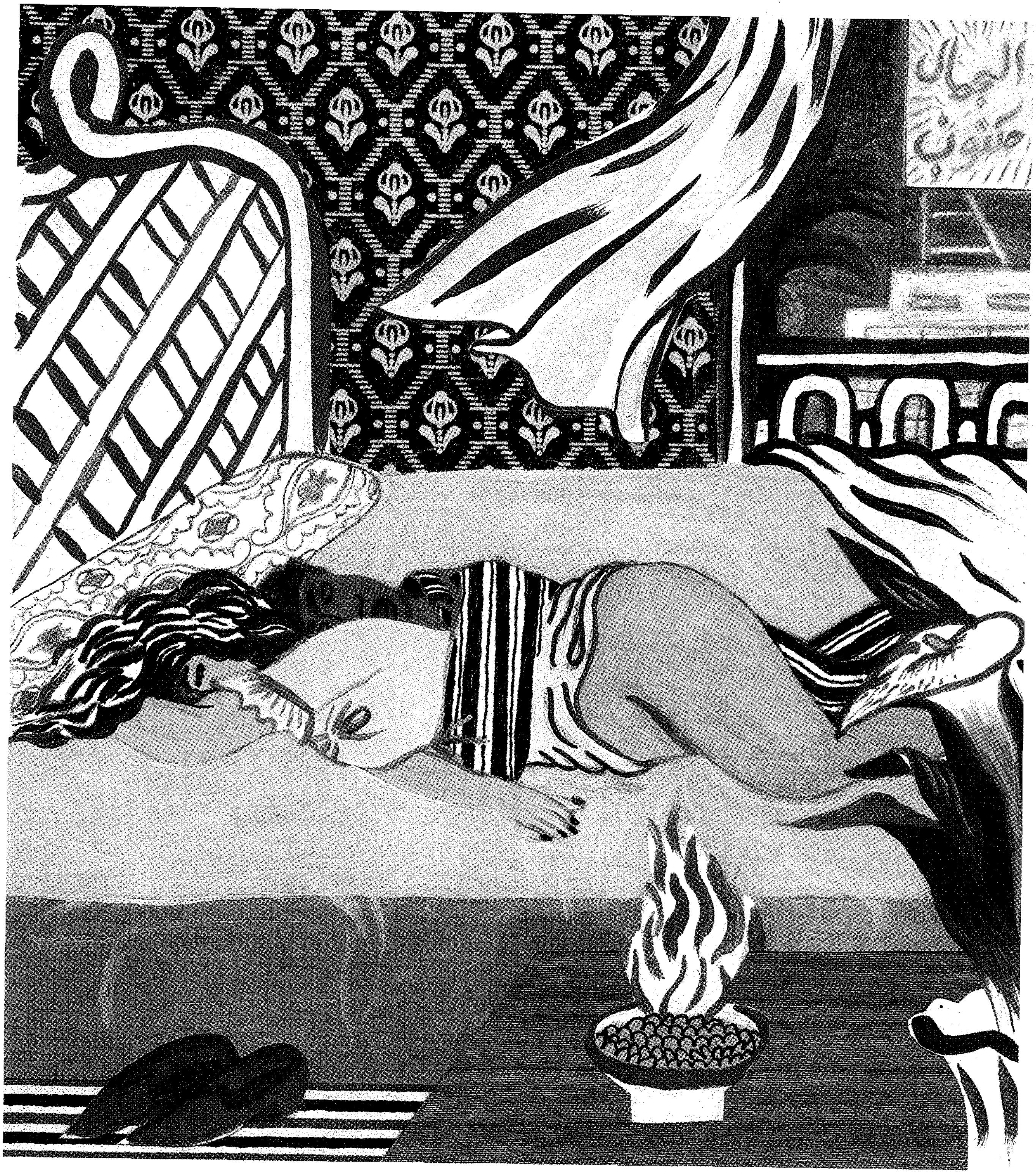
The baby continued to cry. When I opened the door on the third floor, I was blind for a moment while my eyes adjusted to the light. I stood, concentrating on the baby's cry as it swept over me in waves, until at last I could see the corridor leading away into the darkness. I set off toward the nursery to meet my sister's ruined child. ♦

(*Translated, from the Japanese, by Stephen Snyder.*)

FICTION

# BEAUTY IS A FATE BETTER THAN DEATH

## BY TAHAR BEN JELLOUN



On waking, Salem says to himself, "If everything has already been written, then why bother getting up, going out, working, running, lying, hoping, etc.?" His dream has come back to haunt him. In it he sees his wife on a white terrace, overexposed in the light, silently hanging colored sheets on a clothesline, and seeming to signal to a man he doesn't know. She catches sight of Salem and motions to him to go away and leave her alone. She says something that he can't hear. He moves on, slaps himself on the cheek, and babbles some strange words. He looks up and reads an advertising slogan running across a screen that is supported by two drunk chimpanzees: "Everything has already been written; there is nothing you can do about it; for your messages, trust Sony and Casablanca Beer." The words scroll backward as the monkeys laugh themselves sick. A horse, painted green, crosses the road in front of him. Salem wakes with his hair dishevelled, his mouth pasty, and his eyes half open, irritated all over again. Every time he eats lentils for dinner, he has the same dream. He doesn't see the connection between the two, but he decides that he's going to order a big dish of lentils with tomatoes and onions so that he can finally see how the dream ends.

His wife is still asleep. She is lying on her front, her satin nightgown riding up. With his right hand he caresses her naked buttocks. She doesn't move, doesn't register his touch. Watching her, he feels suddenly angry that he is unable to see into her sleep. Perhaps she is having the dream he just had; perhaps she is in a room with the unknown man, who is caressing her buttocks. He moves closer to her, sniffs the nape of her neck, then buries his nose in her thick hair. He puts his arm around her waist and pulls her closer to him. He licks her right earlobe. She slips gently from his embrace, changes position, and continues to sleep. He convinces himself that she is just pretending to sleep. To be sure, he mounts her, slipping his penis between her buttocks. She lets out a little cry of pleasure and adjusts herself so that he can penetrate her gently. She lets him do it without opening her eyes. After their lovemaking, she reaches out a hand to keep her husband with her, then falls back to sleep contented, a light smile on her lips.

LAMIA ZIADA

While he's shaving, Salem notices workers on a scaffolding installing a billboard across the street: "If you've dreamed it, Sony has made it." In vain, he looks for the chimpanzees. "But what *has* Sony made?" he asks himself. Nothing. He smiles and takes a shower while singing the national anthem. This relaxes him and allows him to reflect. He is happy, despite the devilish dream that continues to pursue him. When he was a boy, he was told that the Devil travels at night, tossing bad thoughts into the heads of innocents. He has always believed that his wife is innocence incarnate. But the Devil has a way of getting to even the most honest people.

At breakfast, he asks his wife, "Did you have any dreams last night?"

"Before or after we made love?"

"Either one."

"Yes, of course I had dreams, but I don't really remember them."

"Can I try to help you remember?"

"If you like."

"O.K. You're on the terrace of a house that is drowning in white light. The house is on a hill, overlooking the sea."

"Yes, a terrace that's very white, that's right. I'm hanging laundry—"

"No, you're hanging sheets in a way that sends a message to someone—a man, a stranger who is sitting on a wicker chair on the terrace next door. He is pretending to look at the sea, but he's really looking at you."

"No, there was no man in my dream."

"Are you sure? He was wearing a white suit and a white hat."

"Did he have a thin mustache?"

"I didn't see him that close-up."

"So it's an image—just an image from your own imagination?"

"You threw yourself into his arms."

"Me? No! That was another woman. I was on the other side of the terrace, with my back to the sea. I was watching people pass and I saw a pretty woman, scantily clad, kissing a man with a thin mustache."

"That's strange. To me, it looked like you—you were wearing that black dress that shows off your hips."

"You're wrong. I was in a nightgown and I was just watching. But, my love, stop hounding me about this dream—how can you know what was going on in my subconscious?"

"Darling, I wouldn't be asking you about the dream if it weren't the eighth time I've had it in the course of a month."

"So you're afraid that it's going to come true! You don't have anything to worry about. I'm a faithful wife—that's how I was brought up. Don't forget I'm from Fez."

"Are you trying to tell me that women from Fez don't cheat on their husbands?"

He says this to reassure himself, but a doubt persists. He loves his wife, and he can't help feeling terribly jealous. She loves him, too, in her soft, slow way, without excess, without noise. They don't have children, and they get along well.

Salem decides to go and see Philippe, a man with a strong sense of intuition, who reads palms. He is tall, elegant, and very sensitive. When he sees nothing, he says nothing. When he sees disaster, he closes the hand and changes the subject. This is what he does with Salem. Philippe looks for a long time at Salem's right hand, then he closes it. A bad sign.

Salem is desperate to know what Philippe has seen. He guesses that his wife has a lover, that she no longer loves him, that she's just pretending to come when they make love. He convinces himself that the gymnastics class she takes every day after work is only an hour long, not two hours, as she has told him, and that she spends the rest of the time with her lover. When she comes home at night, while embracing her he sniffs at her like a dog, trying to find the scent of a man on her skin. He hates himself for having sunk so low. One day, while she's in the bathroom, he marks one of her stockings with a pen. That evening, his eyes are glued to his wife's ankle. The mark is no longer there. She has changed her stockings in the course of the day. She has undressed. She has slept with a man. His imagination is on fire. He tries to calm it by asking his wife what she did all day. She tells him that she had to buy new stockings because the ones she put on in the morning had runs in them.

He gets up, paces around the house, then goes back to Philippe and begs him to explain what he saw. "I am prepared for whatever it is. You can tell me the truth: she's cheating on me, isn't she? Well, I'm not the only one. Hamid is divorced. Farid hit his wife's lover and went to prison for assault and battery. Ahmed locked his wife up in a South Moroccan casbah. But I won't do anything. I love my wife, and I couldn't hurt her, even if she made me crazy with jealousy. So tell me!"

Philippe takes another look at Salem's hand, pauses for a moment, then asks Salem if he has seen a film from the forties in which a famous lawyer makes a psychic tell him about an impending catastrophe.

"No. I've never heard of it."

"Well, what I see doesn't make me happy. I hope I'm wrong."

Salem fears for his health. He thinks of his friend Aurore, who was saved by Philippe. During a dinner where palms were read, Philippe noticed a beautiful woman with a slightly distant look, her arms crossed. He went over to her and asked to see her right hand. She refused. He insisted. In the end, she let him see it. What he saw made him pale. He begged her to go and see her doctor as soon as possible. She went the next day. A cancerous tumor had just begun to form in her breast. Thanks to Philippe's insistence, her life was saved. Salem thinks of Aurore and tells himself that he must be harboring a grave illness.

"No, it's not an illness; you are in good health, your lifeline is good. It's your luck line that is marked with a cross—that is what I'm worried about."

"What do you see?"

Philippe asks for a glass of water, stands, starts to speak, hesitates, then says to Salem, "You are going to kill someone."

Salem bursts into laughter. He has no enemies, has never had any desire to hurt anyone. He recognizes that his jealousy is a bad thing, but it hasn't made him want to murder anyone. He is sure that he doesn't have the profile of a killer. How could a man with no desire to kill be led to commit such a crime? He thinks of the little problems he encounters at work and wonders if Philippe isn't playing a joke on him. He thinks of his wife and tries to have faith in her fidelity. So what does his dream mean? He tries to analyze it. He remembers his mother telling him about women who were locked up by their husbands and who communicated with one another from their terraces by using different-colored sheets: white stood for calm; sky blue indicated a slight improvement in the situation; yellow signified a sandstorm, a crisis, anger; green was the desire to escape, to betray; red was unhappiness, blows, violence; and, finally, a torn sheet stood for a formal repudiation of the marriage.

Salem and his wife love each other tenderly and have never suffered this kind of crisis. But who is to say that their happiness will be eternal? He thinks that Philippe must have seen in his palm that his wife is cheating on him and that this betrayal will lead him to kill the man who has dared to lay hands on his beloved. It's more serious than he suspected: it's a double unhappiness. He asks his friend directly, "Will it be my wife's lover that I kill?"

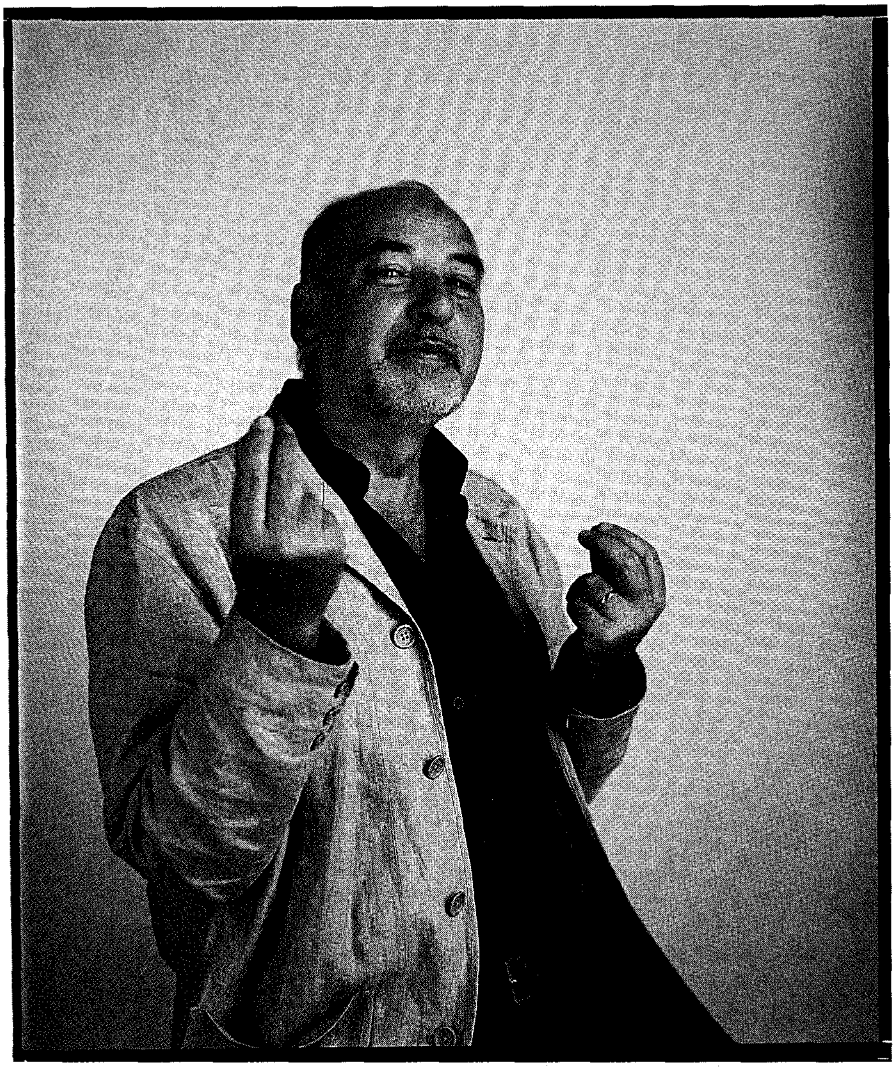
"No, because your wife doesn't have a lover—that I can guarantee you. I know her very well. She loves only you. No, my dear friend, I see a crime. Let's do what we can to avoid it."

This prediction plunges Salem into a deep melancholy. He makes up stories, imagines himself fighting, as in a cloak-and-dagger movie, running away from a crazy man who is threatening him with a knife, jumping from terrace to terrace. He sees himself as a persecuted hero, a man struggling to save his love, his life. During his nights of insomnia, he runs through all the people whose murder would render a service to humanity. Bin Laden! Oh, if only he could find and kill him! But, of course, he'd have to be tried first, like Milosevic. Something tells Salem that the murder he is going to commit will not be political. He tries again to think of his enemies. Like everyone else, he must have some. He thinks of a former schoolmate, Myto, who was short, myopic, repulsively ugly, sly, and very vindictive. He hated everyone who was taller than him, successful with women, or better at soccer. Unpleasantness was his way of life. He would have liked to be a professional soccer player or an actor. Instead, he became the head television censor. His specialty was sending anonymous letters denouncing people. For Salem, he incarnated evil, evil served by an undeniable intelligence. Myto hated everything about Salem: his height (he is six feet tall), his chestnut hair, his light eyes, his eloquence in class, his friendliness. When they were students, it was Myto who informed the police of everything that was going on at the university. One time, Salem was audited after having been denounced by Myto. Salem never sees him anymore, but he suspects that Myto continues to plot against him. Perhaps Myto is the man he'll end up killing. But, despite everything Myto has done, Salem doesn't wish him dead.

He discusses his quandary with Philippe, who tells him that we all have someone we hope will disappear, whether it's someone we're close to or someone we barely know. Salem thinks and thinks but cannot come up with anyone. His imagination moves faster than his thoughts, moves faster than time, and arrives at his own image in the mirror. What he sees there frightens him: the face of a finished man, a face undone, with sunken, sad eyes and wrinkles. He doesn't recognize himself.

He has a fever. He wakes his wife and asks her to call a doctor. He is incapable of saying what he is suffering from. Nothing hurts; he just doesn't feel right. She calms him by taking him in her arms and massaging his forehead and temples. He is comforted. But as soon as he falls asleep the dream comes back: the white terrace, his wife, nude this time, hanging her colored sheets, the man in white jumping from terrace to terrace; she opens her arms and embraces him fiercely, sensuously. Salem wakes with a start and swears that he'll never sleep again. To avoid dreaming, he'll have to avoid sleep. He is going to live standing up, taking stimulants. He will go crazy. His wife leaves him to fight his way through the mania and the anxiety. She thinks that he is making a ridiculous scene. He needs to see a psychiatrist. But that is not a family tradition.

"Then see a witch doctor, a marabou," she tells him. She is ashamed of even considering this, but she is beginning to worry. Salem has changed. He is sometimes delirious. He hasn't gone to work for three days, and his colleagues are annoyed. At the office, his cases are piling up; clients are calling and demanding to speak to him. They don't want to be represented by any other lawyer. Salem is sinking into melancholy, or perhaps a depression. Philippe comes to see him and, to reassure him, reads his palm again and tells him he was mistaken. Salem doesn't believe him. Salem's wife, in whom he has not confided, does not know what to make of this. Philippe tells her what has happened. She bursts into laughter. How can an attorney who swears by the law believe in such nonsense? Philippe is uncomfortable. He doesn't dare remind Salem's wife of the number of times she has asked him to read her palm.



*Tahar Ben Jelloun, photographed in Venice, August, 2000.*

J. P. SOTAN/PHOTOMOVIE/RETNA

Philippe gives Salem a story by Borges, "The Secret Miracle." He has underlined the following sentences: *Then he would reflect that reality does not tend to coincide with forecasts about it. With perverse logic he inferred that to foresee a circumstantial detail is to prevent its happening. Faithful to this feeble magic, he would invent, so that they might not happen, the most atrocious particulars. Naturally, he finished by fearing that these particulars were prophetic. During his wretched nights he strove to hold fast somehow to the fugitive substance of time.*

Salem says nothing. He reads the text again and then decides to forget the whole business. He showers, shaves, sings the national anthem. He dresses and leaves for the office. At the door to the building, people are waiting. They call out to him and ask him about his health. A man in a gray djellabah approaches him and asks for matches. Salem doesn't smoke. The man pulls Salem violently toward him and plunges a knife into his stomach. Salem collapses. The man doesn't move; he waits for the police. He is overpowered by onlookers. He tells them, "This man ruined my life. He got what he deserves."

The wound isn't deep. Salem's life is not in danger. The man is arrested but refuses to explain himself. Did Salem defend him poorly in a trial? The police find no trace of him on Salem's client list. Is he an embittered former acquaintance? Salem reports no memory of ever having known him. So perhaps Salem was sleeping with the man's wife? The police bring in the man's wife. She is a woman of solemn and disturbing beauty. She arrives at the police station in a tight-fitting djellabah. She wears little makeup. Her elegance, her black eyes, her gracious gestures make everyone uncomfortable. Rarely does the police station host such a beautiful woman. She doesn't deny having had relations with the lawyer. When pressed, she says only, "It's our secret garden."

Notified by the police, Philippe goes to the hospital where Salem is being treated. No one has told his wife anything. The police are showing respect for his "conjugal happiness." They will tell her simply that Salem was attacked by a crazy person, an unemployed homeless man. The case will be classified. The beautiful unfaithful woman has demanded a divorce and plans to move to another city. As for Philippe's predictions, they weren't so far from the truth. But there was no death, no family scandal. Everything goes back to normal and Salem's dream changes. After the attack, he dreams of the other woman, chasing him across the terraces of the city, armed only with her scandalous beauty. The chimpanzees are back: they are plastic and they are holding, above the building across the street, a billboard that says, "Beauty is a fate better than death." This is the advertising slogan for an anti-wrinkle cream. As for his wife, she sleeps with her arms wrapped around him, for fear that he'll escape. ♦

(*Translated, from the French, by Deborah Treisman.*)

FICTION

# THE ALBANIAN WRITERS' UNION AS MIRRORED BY A WOMAN

### BY ISMAIL KADARE

To compare the Albanian Writers' Union to a whore seems extremely vulgar, like so many overused metaphors, particularly the ones that have become common since the fall of Communism. Yet my plan to put together an accurate history of the Union (or, at least, its history from 1962 to 1967) has always awakened in me the vision of a certain woman named Marguerite. I am unable to dissociate one from the other; they are bound together like a fragrance to an almost forgotten memory.

Marguerite was a prostitute. She lived in a little alley off Dibra Street, more or less opposite the alley at the end of which the Writers' Union was situated in those years.

I'd heard that an architect in France had constructed a modern building with an all-glass façade designed to reflect the classical cathedral across the street from it, and that, since then, such appositions had become quite fashionable. Still, it was difficult to imagine any particular link between the Writers' Union building, or the institution it represented, and the woman who lived across the way. It was all the more difficult given that the Writers' Union, before taking up residence here, in what had been, under the monarchy, the villa of the Minister of the Interior, had been situated in Carnarvon Street, in a courtyard it shared with the former palace of the princesses, as well as the National Library. (Later, when the Union was moved again, this time to the building in Kavaja Street where King Zog had celebrated his wedding, in 1938, people began to suspect that some mysterious royalist shadow was looming over that ultra-Communist institution.)

What was beyond doubt was the fact that I had come to know of Marguerite for the simple reason that her home was situated in an alley across from the Writers' Union.

On Dibra Street, there was a little coffee shop where the young reporters who worked at the Writers' Union often downed beers when the weather was hot. Next to it was a privately owned fruit stall. It was there that I saw Marguerite for the first time. I was just coming out of the coffee shop when a friend from the Union whispered, "Look, there's Marguerite, the woman who lives across the street."

SYLVIA PLACHY, "UNTITLED" (1992)

I'd heard about her, but so vaguely that I'd forgotten everything—I knew only that she was one of "those women" of an earlier time, who was said to live with her aged mother in a little house in the alley.

Despite what I'd imagined, she was in her mid-thirties, and the light summer dress she was wearing made her look even younger. She had a pale complexion and chestnut-brown hair that fell in loose curls to the nape of her neck, and she didn't look the least bit vulgar. A sort of Anna Karenina, but without Vronsky or the screech of carriage wheels—in place of which she had assumed the fate of a fallen woman in a Communist country in the Balkans in the sixties.

As we returned to the Writers' Union, I listened attentively to what my colleague had to say about her. She was the classiest prostitute in all of Tirana, and apparently the only one of her kind. It was amazing that she was still here in Albania. Her clients were a select group of gentlemen who learned of her by word of mouth. She used the forbidden form of address, "Sir," and let them stay all night. At three in the morning, her mother would serve coffee, and the client would slip payment, a thousand leks, discreetly under Marguerite's pillow.

Rarely had I listened to the details of a story with such fascination.

If someone had told me earlier that I would be captivated by a woman of the old ways—like one of those ladies in muslin hats and veils, glimpsed perhaps in a gondola, whose likenesses you could still find in family photo albums in Tirana's bourgeois households—I would have died laughing. You're a ridiculous old man after all, I would have told myself, nothing but a sentimental fool hiding behind your stylish bell-bottoms, your sweater with "XX" on it to symbolize the twentieth century, and all the other fatuous accessories you use to attract girls.

Still, as if rising through a crack in the ice, a truth surfaced in my mind, one that had long lain dormant there: the girls I knew—the ones with perfect stomachs toned by long hours of sports, manual labor, and swimming—suddenly seemed sterile and lacking in mystery in comparison with Marguerite's body, as I imagined it.

It was long after midnight—I don't know what time exactly, but perhaps the very moment when Marguerite's mother was bringing a second cup of coffee up to her bedroom—and I was lying awake imagining Marguerite's black garters hung over her bedpost, her weary silk undergarments crumpled by lovemaking.

> The black garters of the ladies of another age
> Cast shadows over my thoughts like twilight.

It was hard to tell how long this passion had been pulsating within me. It seemed as though it had not one but several sources, like rivulets that join together to form a stream. I believed that I'd seen photographs of such old-fashioned women, mounted on gravestones in Tirana cemeteries. And one day, on a street corner near Café Ora, I'd seen the famous linguist E.Ç. greet a lady by raising his hat. This was such an unusual sight in the Albanian capital that I'd followed the scholar for a little while, hoping that he would repeat the gesture. But ladies, it seems, were rare in the streets of Tirana.

I knew that because of a similar gesture—because he had kissed the hand of a female scholar from a country now regarded as hostile to ours—E.Ç. was no longer allowed to attend international conferences. As I was walking behind him, I thought what torture it must have been for him to have to unlearn such customs. We young intellectuals had the advantage of never even having known how to kiss a woman's hand. If we'd tried we would most likely have been as ungainly as chimps, or, worse, we would have scarred those dainty fingers with our protruding teeth.

It occurred to me that Marguerite's clients were probably men like E.Ç., although I couldn't quite imagine the old professor knocking on her door in the alley. No, her clients must have been different. Different, but how?

Although I was pleasantly preoccupied with the thought of visiting Marguerite's house in the alley, the plan was shrouded in fog. How could I make contact with her? How could I meet whoever it was who procured her clients? Simply to turn up at her house uninvited was unthinkable.

My attraction to Marguerite might have faded with time, as so many things do, had I not run into her once again at the fruit store. I was standing on the sidewalk coming on to a young woman poet, with whom I was very likely to get somewhere, since she was the type that's particularly susceptible to men who treat women with indifference and speak to them with incomprehensible pretension. I was going on about the castrated Hindu students I'd met at the Gorky Institute, in Moscow, among other equally absurd subjects, but the moment I saw Marguerite I forgot what I was saying. She was making her way timidly—almost fearfully—across the road, like someone who never left home.

Having lost my train of thought, I began to babble nonsensically. Following an appeal by Jawaharlal Nehru and a U.N. commission of inquiry into demographic growth, I asserted, Indian students were being castrated in their own country, to the accompaniment of music that was intended to stir their patriotic fervor. That is, I elaborated, the men stood in line outside a series of temporary operating facilities, inhaling the odor of antiseptic, while marching bands played on throughout the day and the night. The girl finally interrupted me to tell me that my subject was probably most interesting, but she couldn't see how, since I didn't seem to be paying attention to what I was saying and had the air of being elsewhere.

I wanted to respond, "Do you have any idea what's going on, you idiot? Marguerite is here!"

Eventually, the poet understood what was going on. Out of the corner of her eye, she followed the progress of the woman walking toward us, then made a slight movement with her lips, as if to say, "O.K. I get the picture." But I couldn't have cared less what she thought. All my attention was focussed on the woman crossing the road. A cement-streaked truck was hurtling down the street with a great commotion. On it was written "Long Live the Five-Year Plan!"

Marguerite finally reached the sidewalk where we were standing. She was wearing the same summer dress as the first time I'd seen her, and she blinked her eyes in a faraway manner that reminded me of a stork. Her hair was neatly coiffed, in a way that was neither traditional nor modern. She reminded me of Greta Garbo, but a Greta Garbo as seen through the prism of provincial boredom in Albania.

Before she entered the fruit store, she noticed that I was watching her and gave me a gentle look, as if through a window. I thought I saw the gleam of a smile in her eyes; she looked like someone who knew a secret she wasn't going to tell.

Various thoughts raced through my mind like cars about to crash. Just as we had heard of her, she had likely heard of us—we young men who had recently returned from studying abroad and were now working for the newspaper at the Writers' Union. She probably read books. How else would she spend her days while waiting for night to fall? Perhaps she was eager to know what the men of the younger generation were like—writers and artists who, unlike their predecessors, had learned not French or Italian but the languages of the East: Polish, Mongolian, Russian, Hungarian.

Marguerite came out of the shop with a bag of apples in her hand. Perhaps she would share them with her client before the 3 A.M. coffee. . . . She gave me another gentle but brief glance, without any of the nuance I hoped to see in it.

When she'd finally made it safely back to the other side of the road and disappeared into her little alley, I took a deep breath, as relieved as if I'd been leading her there on a leash. I believe I gave the poet a smile, but it was no doubt so insincere that she did not react. Her look made it clear that although my pedestal was still standing it might not be for long. Marguerite's departure, however, had given me back my self-confidence, and I began once again to ramble on about the castration ceremony, which, as I described it, took place in iodine-scented barracks as a band played and Nasser, Tito, and even Chinese observers looked on.

She listened to me attentively, but without the blind adoration she had shown earlier. My eyes wandered vaguely off toward the crossroads where Marguerite's mauve toenail polish seemed to have left a dreamy hue.

"Listen," I said suddenly to the young poet, "did you ever happen to hear from your grandfather, for example, or from an uncle, about women of easy virtue—I mean, streetwalkers, though the term doesn't really fit, since they almost never go out? What I mean is, have you heard of any women like that who have a select circle of clients? I mean, about how their clients contact them, and how . . ."

I had to repeat the question several times before she understood what I was getting at. It was the first time I'd seen her frown, an expression that strangely suited her, and then she got angry.

"What do you take me for?" she responded indignantly.

I wanted to tell her that she had misunderstood, that I was asking about certain social conventions that interested me as a writer and journalist, but she was not listening anymore. She said goodbye and turned to leave just as a cement-streaked truck, no doubt the same one that had passed by earlier, made its way noisily up the road. The young poet did not look back the way she usually did whenever we parted.

"Silly socialist-realist cow!" I said to myself and put her out of my mind.

I decided that, no matter what it took, I had to go and see Marguerite. The decision seemed to take possession of my entire being, from my brain to the depths of my gut. Whenever one part of my body let up, another part would push me onward. And, to my surprise, it was not always the flesh that incited me.

Unlike what we call love affairs, in which the preliminaries—the dates and the outings in parks and cafés, the writing of letters—are easy but the finale, the actual possession, is much less predictable, in this case the hardest, the almost impossible, thing was simply making contact. What I needed was an alternative map of Tirana, one that could show me the secret codes and addresses I had no way of uncovering.

One evening, I drank a beer at the Barrel Bar with a colleague of mine from the editorial staff, the one who had first told me about M., as we now referred to her. Afterward, our steps led us inevitably toward where we believed her house to be. From Barricade Street we turned into Dibra Street, where I had carefully noted the entrance to the alley in which she and her dream-colored toenails had disappeared.

It was a quiet night, bathed in a faint moonlight that seemed to have been created just for such alleys as this, alleys at the heart of the city which seemed to lead a life of their own, away from the radiance of Socialism. We observed the wooden doorways with decorated lintels, and the little gardens behind them where persimmon trees grew. The houses had two stories, some with overhanging eaves, and most of the windows had flower boxes. Each time we saw a light shining in a window, we were convinced that it had to be Marguerite's house.

*Ismail Kadare, photographed in the nineteen-seventies.*

HORST TAPPE/GETTY IMAGES

I slept badly that night. Bits and pieces of dreams, like debris through which I could barely make my way, left me more exhausted than a sleepless night would have. I woke up frequently, and almost every time I relived the same scene: I was walking down the abandoned little alley, this time as Marguerite's client, looking for her doorway. I began to feel nervous. I wondered whether the alley was actually as removed from the rest of the city as I had imagined. Was it possible that the supposedly ubiquitous eye of the Sigurimi could have overlooked Marguerite and her visitors? Or was she perhaps part of its network of informers?

It suddenly seemed crazily naïve to believe otherwise. This was almost enough to cool my passion, to make the mauve nail polish, the black garters, the coffee at 3 A.M., and the sound of the forbidden "Sir" lose their charm. Relieved, I fell asleep, only to wake up again an hour later as if a loud bell had rung. I abruptly recalled the words of my cousin who worked for the Ministry of the Interior: "You think we see everything? Let me tell you the truth. It's exactly the opposite. We aren't seeing shit. We were the ones who created this myth, in order to frighten everyone. And, surprisingly enough, it worked. If you only knew what is really going on in this country."

I weighed his words over and over, and my heart caught fire again. *If you only knew what is really going on in this country.* I was now sure that the most complicated thing going on in the country had to do with what lay between Marguerite's legs.

I persuaded myself that my fear of the Sigurimi was groundless. After all, even if Marguerite were discovered, the state would be perturbed to learn that some minister or general had been sleeping with her, but not particularly concerned about a young scribbler. Especially given the poetry this writer had published—he was clearly not someone to be taken seriously, and it would be no great scandal if he'd fallen for a whore.

Almost spitefully, I recalled the manuscript of a novel I had written while studying in Moscow, and outlined my defense in front of an imaginary jury: "I have never concealed the fact that I am attracted by whores. Indeed, my first novel, which I am not able to publish because of you, is full of them. You can keep company with whomever you wish, with the ladies of the executive council of the Women's Federation or with deputies from the Party Plenum, etc. As for me, I keep the company I deserve: that of whores."

The next morning, I had breakfast with my friend from the Union and told him what I had dreamed. We had a good laugh about it. Then he said that, all joking aside, I was quite right about one thing: there had been a certain political relaxation recently and such matters were no longer treated as they had been in the past.

It was true. In fact, two weeks earlier, the Leader himself had surprised everyone by making that old-fashioned gesture, long forbidden in our country: he had kissed a woman's hand. And he'd done it in public in front of the cameras, right in the middle of the People's Assembly!

That kiss on the hand of a representative of the Greek minority in parliament gave rise to a wave of enthusiasm among intellectuals: what a gentleman Comrade Enver was! Compared with him, not only Khrushchev and Gottwald but even Thorez, in Paris, looked like peasants.

When I was watching the news that evening, I thought about the linguist E.Ç., who had had such problems because of the same gesture. Then it occurred to me that it was precisely *because* of E.Ç. that the Leader of the Party had remembered the custom. On the surface, my hypothesis seemed unlikely, but if you looked deeper it made sense. Sometime earlier, at a meeting with intellectuals, the Leader of the Party had praised E.Ç.'s work for the first time

*"I'm droppin' all my 'G's for a while."*

in seventeen years. In the days preceding the meeting, the Leader, looking for ways in which to initiate the thaw, would probably have asked to see the file on E.Ç., which most certainly contained multiple references to the famous kiss on the hand. Repressed jealousy, a copycat reflex, and nostalgia for the years he had spent in France—all inextricably mixed together—may have led the Leader, when the time came to signal the thaw, to mimic that kiss himself.

I was convinced of this, just as I was convinced that frequenting Marguerite would not be nearly as dangerous now as it had been in the past.

The thaw in the political climate was accompanied, strangely enough, by a closing of the borders. At Rinas airport, planes became increasingly rare. But because the cancelled flights were all coming from Eastern-bloc countries people hardly mourned them: "So there are fewer flights from the Soviet Union and East Germany. You call that bad news?"

Although no one said so openly, many people dreamed of other, better flights coming in to replace those from the East.

As air traffic decreased, there were also fewer citizens from other Socialist countries to be seen. We no longer knew what to think of the few who did turn up. Until then, we had been one big family, but now we were somewhat estranged.

Marguerite remained apart from all these shakeups. Her body was and had always been more exotic than those of the Hungarians, the Russians, the Latvians, or the Jews with whom our generation had had contact. It belonged to a different galaxy, and dreaming of it was like crossing an abyss.

The editorial staff of the literary newspaper occupied two rooms on the second floor of the Writers' Union. In one of them, the smaller of the two, sat the editor-in-chief; in the other one were the journalists. From the widest of its three windows, one could look across the garden and down to the wrought-iron gate. The garden was beautiful, both on sunny and on rainy days, and the window was equally well suited for good moods and for morose ones.

From this vantage point, we could see everyone who entered and left the building. Viewed from above, they all looked either a little crooked or comical, and, whether they were dawdling or hurrying, it was impossible to tell if they were going away satisfied or frustrated. The comings and goings were particularly frequent in the autumn, which was the season for sending delegations abroad. There were far fewer delegations this year than there had been in the past. Aside from China, the only possible destinations were, of course, Korea, Vietnam, Cuba, and a couple of African countries. The dispatch of a delegation to the Arbëresh, in Italy, was now as rare as the appearance of a comet in the sky.

As I daydreamed, gazing down at the garden, which autumn had already laid bare, I found myself contemplating the dilemma that is often faced in fairy tales—of having to choose between two equally attractive wishes. In my case, the choice was between a trip abroad and a night with Marguerite. I would, of course, have chosen the former, but not without a certain quickening of the heart at the loss of the latter.

Neither my colleague nor I had seen her again. We seemed incapable of finding the path that led to her house. Or had our subconscious slyly kept us from discovering it?

After the November holidays, the winter got drearier and drearier, especially at the Writers' Union. Nothing happened—at least, nothing that we'd hoped for.

I had begun writing a novel with a title I very much liked, "The Bedridden Gypsy." The problem was that, aside from the title and a bright idea that had cost me a sleepless night and seemed exceptionally innovative at the time, I had no clue what I was going to write about.

The idea related to the rhythm of the narrative, which I had decided to adapt to the illness of the protagonist. In other words, when his temperature rose or his pulse raced, the rhythm would speed up accordingly. But when, for example, the Gypsy fell into a coma, the exact opposite would happen. And so it would develop, all in accordance with his fevers, his kidney stones, etc.

I had written only the first chapter, in which the Gypsy was examined by a physician, and the beginning of the second chapter, in which he was waiting for the results of his tests. I had left off there because I could not decide what disease my Gypsy should have. My colleague, the only one with whom I had discussed my idea, had pointed out that this decision was crucial, since everything else in the novel would depend on it. If I was planning on a long novel, in two volumes, say, as had become fashionable lately, I would have to come up with some long-term wasting disease. For a short novel, on the other hand, the Gypsy would have to be afflicted with a malady that would take him to his grave in no time at all.

As I agonized over this decision, I stopped writing—although this caused me to agonize even more.

One day, my colleague announced that he had discovered how to get to M. The method for making contact with her was more or less what we had supposed it would be, but not quite as mysterious. The prospective client had to go to a neighbor of hers, who knitted sweaters and did alterations. There, he would mention a particular type of stitch that only Marguerite and her mother knew. The neighbor would then call the two women over to meet the client, or would take the client to their house. At that point, an arrangement might be made, and the date and the other conditions fixed.

So that was how it worked. Marguerite could thus select her clients. We were excited, because we were sure that she would grant us a visa, so to speak. We were also pleased by the thought that we would each be getting a sweater knitted by her in the bargain—one for me with the two "X"s of the twentieth century on it, and one for my colleague with the symbol of his choice.

Because work at the office continued to be as gloomy as it was wearisome, we often found ourselves dreaming of our "knitting afternoon," as we referred to the visit to M.'s neighbor. In order to show that we were serious people, we decided, it would be best to wear ties and white shirts. This brought us around to the question of age. Because we feared being rejected as too young, we discussed different ways of combing our hair in order to look older. It occurred to us that we should perhaps wear hats or nonchalantly light up one of those cigars which were now being sold at Hotel Dajti. I also considered pulling out, as if by accident, the book of poems I'd published when I was studying in Moscow, whose foreword stated, in black and white, that I had been influenced by certain kinds of decadent literature. This option, although risky, seemed especially appealing. But, after our initial excitement wore away, we came to the conclusion that that might be a little too much. It was rather like mentioning rope in the house of a hanged man. Even conversation about Greta Garbo, the terrifying Kafka, or Benedetto Croce, which we had at first thought would be perfect, now began to seem inappropriate. We might give the impression that we were agents provocateurs or worse: candidates for prison. It would be better to let things develop by themselves.

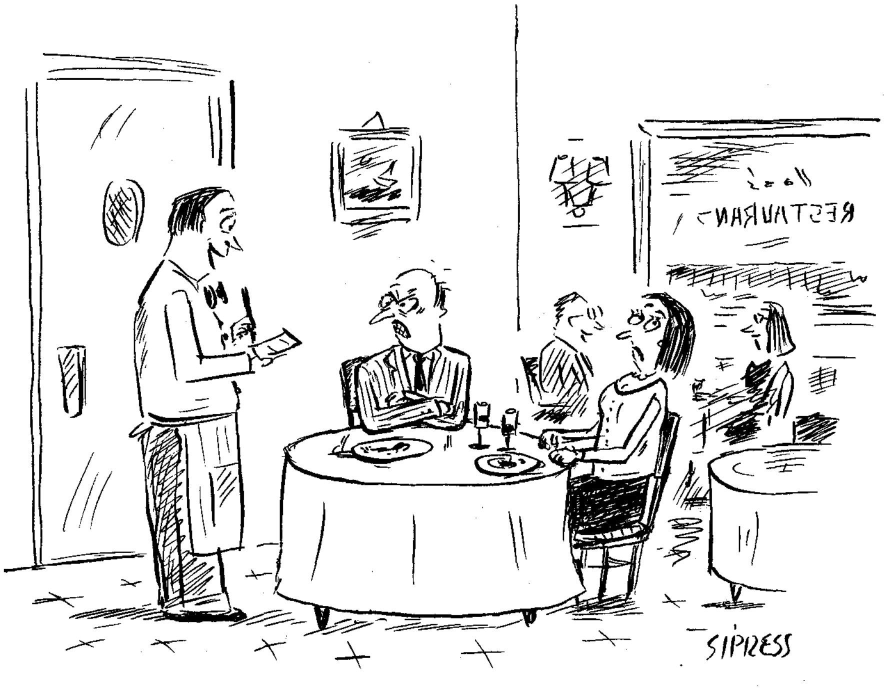
It was a cold day in March when the editor-in-chief, who had just returned from a meeting of the Central Committee, called us into his office. He had a sinister expression, and his words were equally spine-chilling. The Party had criticized the press and, in particular, the newspaper published by the Writers' Union. There had also been criticism of the Writers' Union itself, but this would be dealt with at a later meeting. For some time now, the Party had sensed a certain slackness in the newspaper, a decline in revolutionary fervor, and a passiveness that was at odds with the obligatory optimism of a Socialist society. The editor-in-chief provided a few examples and then turned to me: "Look here, in the foreign-affairs section you're in charge of, there have been very few features on the achievements of literature and art in China, Vietnam, and Cuba, or on progressive revolutionary art around the world. Too much space has been taken up by articles, for example, on the death of the American writer Hemingway, not to mention rumors and allegations about the suicide of Marilyn Monroe. What I would like to know here is, what is your attraction, or, rather, obsession, with suicide? Even Mayakovski's poem 'Cloud in Trousers' was published with a note announcing 'the eve of the anniversary of the poet's suicide.' "

I did not know what to say. On any other occasion, I would have replied that we had always reported on the suicides and emotional crises of Western writers as manifestations of the crisis in capitalist society, etc. But I'd got myself in a muddle with Mayakovski, since he had taken his life under Stalin.

The other sections of the newspaper were criticized as well: hermetic verse, frivolous short stories, reviews that seemed to deviate from the Party line.

After the meeting, we returned to our office, hanging our heads.

Later that day, we learned that sim-



*"Can I bring you something else to complain about?"*

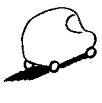
ilar meetings had been held everywhere: at the opera house, which was not far from our building; at the film studio; at the People's Theatre; and, of course, at the publishing companies. An extraordinary assembly of the Writers' Union was scheduled for the following week.

Two days before the assembly, the head of the personnel division at the Writers' Union called me in to answer questions about an official trip to Shkodër that I had taken sometime earlier. According to information that he had received from there, I had apparently frequented some decadent establishments. I jumped to my feet to protest this accusation, insisting that I did not know any prostitutes in Shkodër and, to prove my case, I added that I had jacked off at the hotel, despite the fact that the temperature in my room was well below zero.

The chief of personnel listened to me with an ironic smile. "That's enough," he said finally. "Don't bother getting on your high horse. Decadent establishments are not only whorehouses. But since you insist on an explanation, let me inform you that you were seen at a so-called 'literary salon' in Shkodër, one of those rat holes for the town's aging Catholic bourgeoisie who yearn to turn back the clock."

I could not have been more astonished if someone had slapped me in the face. All my confidence dissipated. I had actually attended a literary gathering. A comic poet called Bik N., a delightfully silly person, had invited me, saying, "We are going to a literary salon this evening, one of those traditions that only our beloved Shkodër knows how to preserve."

I was fascinated to be able to visit an old Scutarine mansion, at the center of town, where everything was as it used to be: kilims in the living room, a fireplace and a brazier in Ottoman style, an icon of the Virgin in the corner, and, of course, the people. Aside from our host—whom everyone called Miss Bimbli although she was almost seventy, and who the clown Bik N. insisted was his lover—there was only a slender old woman, who didn't say a word, and the blind poet Llesh Huta.

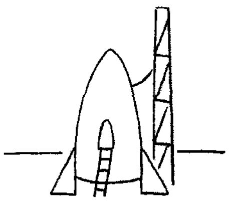


After drinking tea and Cognac, Bik N. recited his latest sonnet, "Springtime in the Fall," which was, of course, dedicated to the rejuvenation of Miss Bimbli, though no signs of revival could be seen in her well-nourished body. Then the blind poet read a poem, which was nothing like the sonnet. In fact, it was little more than an insulting tirade about a woman who had once rejected him. It ended with the line "You who couldn't see how to love me, may you forever see less than I."

I remembered this in passing and must have blushed a bit, because the chief of personnel spoke up. "See how ashamed you are of yourself?"

I endeavored to counter this by saying that the atmosphere might have been old-fashioned, but I had not sensed any nostalgia for the past nor had I heard any innuendos about the present.

The chief of personnel shook his head and searched for something in the file in front of him. "It may look that way on the surface," he said, "but you cannot know what they're saying when your back is turned. In any case, it does not really matter what was or was not said that day. What matters is the general climate. Do you understand what I am saying? The Party has let it be known that there has been a decline in revolutionary fervor. And this is precisely what the enemy is waiting for: a relaxation on our part. So-called 'humane' behavior the enemy regards as weakness, and he's looking to gain ground wherever we doze off. When the enemy sees that he has failed in overt action, he turns to covert methods: alcohol, women, music, religion, hermetic poetry, fashion. He has his eye on you—especially you young people who have just come back from abroad."



His eyes glowed like two lumps of coal, and I thought, Just wait. He's going to bring up the introduction to my book, which mentions the decadent influence in my poetry. But, thank God, he said nothing about it.

"There are no literary salons aside from the salons of the Party," he continued. "Meetings, consultations with the working class, assemblies—these are the greatest salons art can know. Not those damp and dingy dumps. You get my meaning, son?"

Rising to his feet to indicate that the meeting was over, he winked at me as he often did when he wanted to stress something: "Pay a little more attention to your writing, and listen to the advice given to you by our comrades from China. Do I make myself clear?"

I nodded, quite bewildered by the flood of words and especially by the wink.

"At the assembly the day after tomorrow, the comrades will speak out on these matters," he said as I was leaving. "You young people will get a chance to have your say, too, I believe."

The assembly was held in one of the auditoriums of the Palace of Culture. In contrast to earlier occasions, the Party leaders taking part wore sombre expressions. And the text of the main speech was harsh indeed. With the country under bitter siege, at a time when the Albanian people and their Communist leaders were working and struggling to break through the blockade, the writers and artists of Albania were, alas, behaving in just the opposite manner. The jargon flowed on and on: alienation from the working masses, living in an ivory tower, bourgeois ways.

"A tainted spirit that has nothing in common with Communist ideals is spreading in our midst," the president of the Writers' Union declared. Everyone was waiting for names to be called, and the tension in the auditorium became unbearable. Apparently, before getting to the names, however, the Party leaders had decided to list the sinful influences to which we had succumbed. Drunkards, sexual obsessives, homosexuals, moral and political pimps, gamblers, nostalgics, mystics, and hermetics were not only infiltrating our ranks but apparently using their influence to spread the afflicted spirit mentioned earlier.

My heart was beating slowly. I had committed at least three of the sins the leaders were referring to—not to mention my preoccupation with suicide, which the editor-in-chief had recently denounced, and my obsession with black garters.

The speaker, it seemed, had got too close to the microphone, so that when he said the word "shakeup" it generated a veritable tremor in the auditorium. "The Party is calling for a shakeup among writers and artists," he repeated. "That is why this assembly has been convened. And that is what we have come here to discuss."

We pushed our way to the exits, bumping into one another like a bevy of the blind.

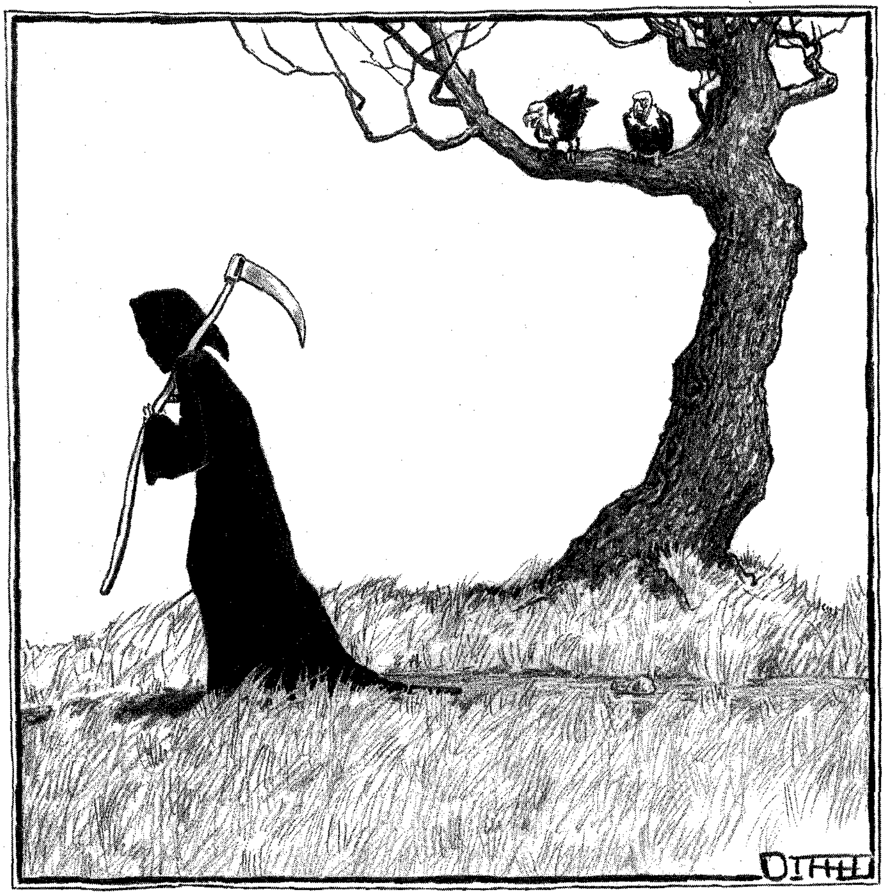
The afternoon session was even more depressing. The first speakers outdid one another with bitter invective, ranting on and on about the tainted pride of intellectuals, their egotism, their thirst for praise, money, and excess. Before calling for the obligatory "shakeup," one of the speakers shouted twice, "Shame on us!" The next speaker, finding nothing original to say, simply shouted, "It is time for another shakeup!"

"How did we get ourselves into such a mess?" It was with these words, spoken in a trembling voice, that one of the veteran writers began his speech. Since the First World War he had been writing plays for children in which the forces of good always won in the end; this had insured his success through several regimes. We were the bottom of the barrel, the scum of the earth, he announced.

At that moment, there was a small commotion at the entrance to the auditorium. The wife of the Great Leader had arrived to observe. I exchanged a fleeting glance with my colleague.

After the veteran writer, it was the turn of a literary critic and then of the female poet to whom I had pontificated on the subject of Hindu castration some months earlier. The emotion in her eyes, her feverish tone implied a dangerous sincerity.

"We, the writers of the younger generation, who are entering the world of literature with the purest of emotions, have been saddened by the behavior of our elders, but until now we failed to understand the origin of the spirit that had tainted them. This assembly has opened our eyes!"



*"Love your work."*

• •

My heart missed a beat. Just wait till she mentions your name as an example, I thought, cursing myself. What an idiot I was, what an imbecile! Why had I insisted on telling my castration story to *her*?

The young poet continued to speak with a steely resolve. "We young writers embarking on the road to literature are, indeed, naïve, especially we female writers, but there is nothing wrong with being naïve. What is wrong is when someone tries to take advantage of the gullibility of others."

I was flabbergasted. The silence in the auditorium became absolute. Because almost all the young writers at the Union had tried to get the girl into bed by offering to publish her poems, we were convinced that our names would be mentioned. I had not directly solicited her favors yet, but anyone who had overheard me speaking to her about castration would have been led to believe that it was just a prelude to seduction.

The discussion became more and more aggressive. "What have we come to, comrades?" one of the women on the podium called out. "Others are doing great deeds on the work front, freezing in the snow, diving into the flames to save their comrades, while we are hanging around in the kitchen doing nothing."

The wife of the Leader nodded in approval, and several others on the podium followed suit.

The room was filled with a heavy sense of guilt. Some of us were red-eyed. I thought I could hear a couple of people sobbing quietly.

How could we cleanse ourselves of such enormous failings? Where was the way forward? As if reading our thoughts, the president of the Writers' Union, before closing the meeting, tackled precisely this question. "It will help no one to sit around and weep. We must find a solution. The meeting is adjourned," he declared. "The next session begins tomorrow morning at seven o'clock."

I exchanged another quick look with

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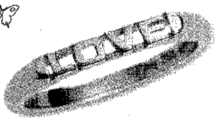

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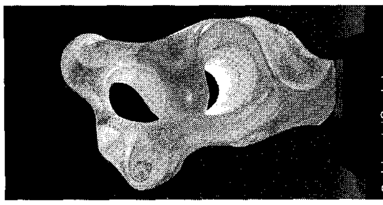

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my colleague. An assembly at seven in the morning? No need for comment.

Most of the writers and artists were already at the Palace of Culture when I arrived with swollen, sleepy eyes. It was six-thirty, but the glass doors were still locked.

I looked around for my colleague, who was sneaking a smoke behind a column. "I got here at six o'clock," he whispered. "I couldn't get a wink of sleep. And there were other people here before me."

It was now seven. The opening time, which had seemed scandalously early the day before, now seemed scandalously late.

The doors of the Palace of Culture finally opened and the people thronged in and assembled in a dignified silence. The members of the presidency sat down at their tables with equal dignity.

The president opened the session by giving the floor to the Party secretary of the Writers' Union. There was a certain optimism in his voice, but it conveyed absolutely no hope. On the contrary, it made us even more afraid. When the next speaker, turning to possible solutions, referred briefly to a "reduction of salaries," the audience froze, but a second later I could sense some relief. So that is what they were building up to! Let them reduce the damn salaries, or even do away with them altogether—if only it will spare us this torture!

We were all possessed by an unexpected euphoria. We were going to give up something that was synonymous both with pleasure and with vice. In other words, we would part with our salaries as we would part from a whore.

Amid all the excitement, one writer who had only recently made a name for himself took to the podium and, in a loud voice, much more confident than those of the speakers of the previous day, proclaimed that, regardless of the decision the assembly might reach on the question of salaries, he intended to offer the government any proceeds he received for his forthcoming novel, which had just gone to press.

The audience applauded, although the faces of the members of the presidium remained impassive.

Now that the pressure was somewhat relieved, I felt a quickening in my heart again. Then for some reason, I don't know why, I thought of Marguerite. She was no doubt still asleep, exhausted by a night of lovemaking. Under the pillow beside her, a client had left a thousand-lek bill. Oh, that pillow, where I had so often imagined leaving my own salary—which was, doubtless, what had made me think of her.

There was silence in the auditorium once again. A militant poet with a grave expression on his face was giving a speech. His words were all the harsher because he stuttered. "We have spoken here of our novels and our poems, but I have heard no one refer to the most majestic of all poems, a poem that was composed recently here in Albania."

It took us a moment to realize that he was referring to a speech that the Leader had given in a town in the north of the country.

We froze again. We had just managed to catch our breaths, and now the spectre of guilt returned, more sinister than ever!

Icy and observant, the eyes of the Leader's wife remained fixed on the auditorium. We could not make out what was expected of us.

A clean-shaven novelist who rarely spoke at public meetings sought permission to take the floor right after the poet. Before he even got to the microphone, he let out a cry: "It's now or never!"

We could not believe our ears. He had always been a discreet person, and had in fact been criticized on several occasions for intellectual hermeticism. Now he, too, was calling for a shakeup, and in harsher terms than anyone had used yet. Among them, unexpectedly and irreversibly, like a dark cloud on the horizon, echoed the word "rotation."

So that was it!

The Leader's speech, the one that had just been reinvented as a poem—it, too, had spoken of "rotation."

The rotation in question, which we had lightheartedly assumed was intended for Party cadres and bureaucratic officials, was actually meant for us. This, and not a reduction of salaries or any other frivolous issue, was the heart of the matter.

Slowly, everyone began to realize what was going on.

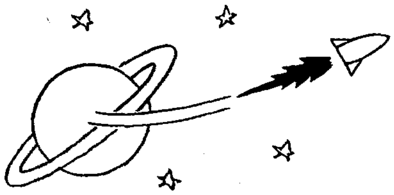
It was an incredible week. There had never been so much coming and going at the Writers' Union. From our office window we watched wet umbrellas being turned inside out by the wind.

The president of the Writers' Union and the Party secretary consulted with us one by one to find out where in the country we wanted to spend our period of rotation. They were convinced that, despite the unanimous vote for rotation, only a portion of the writers would actually be banished from the capital. The others would be thanked for their willingness to go but would be told that they were still needed in Tirana.

During the interviews in the president's office, the writers, after announcing which village or town they wished to go to in order to learn about real life, also took the opportunity to bring up the various personal problems that would make it impossible for them to leave their homes at the moment, in the hope that the Party would be generous and understanding.

The personal issues that impeded the writers and artists from going away were quite astounding. It seemed inconceivable that such a quantity of vigorous, sunny works of art—the mellow harvest of Albanian socialist realism—could have been produced by people who were so ill and debilitated. Prostate problems, hemorrhoids, hernias, and nocturnal incontinence seemed harmless next to the more serious illnesses—running sores, pustules, buboes, scabies—unseen in Albania since the years of the Ottoman Empire.

Those who came once often asked to be interviewed again. In the second session, they enumerated even more serious illnesses, which they had concealed during their first interview because of their "damn neo-bourgeois pride." Some even undid their pants to prove that they had genital eczema, or an ulcerated scrotum, or some other horror. One man expounded on the problems of his wife's infertility, broke into tears, and then revealed that she had been cheating on him with a neighbor. Another was being beaten by his son, and a third individual brought forth a document certifying that he was mentally ill.



A rumor that the Western press had referred to the rotation of writers from the Albanian capital led to the hope that only a third of us would be banished. A second rumor, clarifying that it had been not the Western press but simply the Albanian émigré press, caused that hope to fade. Nonetheless, it was still generally believed that even in a worst-case scenario no more than half the writers would be expelled.

But another rumor soon spread: neither the Western press nor the Albanian émigré press had written a word about the calamity that was about to befall Albanian writers and artists. Indeed, one émigré newspaper, not without a certain satisfaction, had let it be known that the whole thing would do Albanian writers good. This was the system they had clamored for; let them enjoy it to the fullest.

By the end of the week, we had realized that it was pointless to swim against the tide. Everyone was to be rotated, even the president of the Writers' Union. There was to be an endless convoy of known and lesser-known individuals, Communists and non-Communists, people who had committed political errors and people who hadn't, accompanied by those who were destined to commit errors in the future, those who would never commit errors, and even those who might possibly commit errors.

The last people to be summoned to the office of the president of the Writers' Union were those of us who worked there. The president looked calm, but the bags under his eyes were more ponderous than ever. He asked us to take a seat on the sofa.

"Well, now it's our turn," he said

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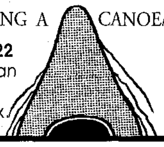

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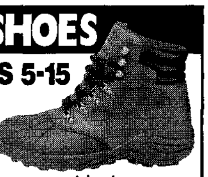

freely. "I suppose you have heard. I'll be going to Rubik, to live among the miners."

My colleague and I nodded to show him that we had been informed. As I listened to him speaking, I wondered why I had always avoided contact with this man. He had studied in France in the thirties, was always well dressed, often with a French beret and a pipe, like the French writers we had seen in photographs. I found all of this quite captivating and, in fact, two weeks earlier, on one occasion when I was daydreaming about Marguerite, I had thought of how wonderful it would be if he were to lend me his beret and pipe for my first visit to her.

But from our very first meeting, when he'd invited me to have coffee with him, as he often did with newcomers to the Writers' Union, I'd felt that close relations with him would be difficult. Despite the beret and the pipe, the conversation between us was stilted. I had the impression that this was my fault, but that only made me more nervous. I have never been much of a talker, but suddenly I was more tight-lipped than ever. Faced with my silence, he also became uneasy. His pipe went out several times, and he fiddled with it for a while, changing the tobacco. Then he asked me a second time about my studies at the Gorky Institute and told me a little about his younger days in France.

Later, thinking over our meeting, I felt that I understood the source of our unease. This fellow had abandoned the West to adapt himself to the East. I, on the other hand, had just returned from the terrifying East, with an incipient desire for the other side. We were meeting at a crossroads known as Albania, each of us carrying signs pointing in the opposite direction. It was almost as if we were each saying to the other, "Where do you think you're going, you poor fool?"

He was destroying my dream, and I suppose that I was doing the same to his. It was obvious that we wouldn't get along.

"That's it, boys," he said now. I took a look at his beret and at the pipe that he had propped on a corner of his imposing desk. Even he didn't seem to think that these things would save him this time. "That's it, boys," he repeated and shook our hands. "May fortune be with you wherever you go."

## IN A MAN'S LIFE

In a man's life
the first temple is destroyed and the second temple is destroyed
and he must stay in his life,
not like the people that went into exile
far away,
and not like God,
who simply rose to higher regions.

In a man's life
he resurrects the dead in a dream
and in a second dream he buries them.

—*Yehuda Amichai*

(*Translated, from the Hebrew, by Leon Wieseltier.*)

I had been in the little town of B. for a week. I was there in two capacities: first as a young writer getting to know life by going to the textile factory every day, and second as a journalist, a local correspondent for a weekly literary newspaper.

The mornings I spent at the factory were pleasant enough. There were quite a few engineers and bookkeepers there who had just come from Tirana and who had done their studies in the East. They spent much of their time at the factory club, gulping down glass after glass of Cognac. I enjoyed their company from the first day. They were full of fun and were delightfully irreverent about everything. I was particularly fond of the way they addressed one another by nicknames related to the countries where they had studied. Taxh Paholl, who was the head of the group, was called Pan because he had been in Poland, and Liko Ibrahim they called Herr because he had studied in East Germany.

I was the only one who had been in Moscow, but in their eyes, I don't know why, Moscow was considered somewhat backward. Thrilled as I was by their company, I did nothing to defend the Russian capital, nor did I deny being involved in an especially backward field: literature. The only problem I had was keeping up with them in their drinking. This, at any rate, served to confirm their conviction that literature was behind the times.

Rainy afternoons in the little town were particularly boring. The evenings were even worse, especially Saturday evenings, when my new friends the engineers were stuck in never-ending meetings.

I was in no mood to write. The manuscript of my "Bedridden Gypsy," which I had brought with me, remained untouched at the bottom of my suitcase. I sauntered up the main street to the only hotel in town, stopping at the cinema in the vain hope that they had changed the weekly film, and then strolled back down the street.

Passersby were rare. The dingy restaurant where I had dinner was not yet open. Two sisters, who were considered to be of dubious moral character, owing to their weakness for men—especially for those who had just arrived from the capital—were walking arm in arm down the road, swinging their hips. Seeing them made me only more depressed. "Bloody fat-assed whore!" someone muttered from the sidewalk.

The restaurant finally opened its doors. I took a seat in the corner and asked for one of the two dishes on the menu: meat stew with kidney beans. A man sat down beside me. "Go fuck yourself," he shouted to someone, or perhaps to himself. He ordered a double raki, which he downed in one gulp.

Why the hell am I here? I thought.

I was relieved to get back out on the street. A light rain was falling. It was almost nine o'clock, but I didn't see any of the engineers. My hope of lightening up the evening with a game of cards was diminishing bit by bit. Last Saturday, the engineers' meeting had lasted until midnight.

The two sisters were making their last rounds through town. As I passed them, sensing their longing for the big city, I was filled with a powerful feeling of superiority. *If you country bumpkins only knew what I left behind!* An intoxicating void opened up within me. *If you only knew.* But what was there to know? What had I really given up? To my surprise, what came to mind was not the smell of the mimosas on the Grand Boulevard, or the Café Flora, where I used to meet my friends, or the Art Gallery, or the Writers' Union, or some love affair. Instead, I was reminiscing about an event that had never happened, a non-visit to a high-class whore named Marguerite.

Perhaps it was because she shared a dubious moral character with those girls, or perhaps it was just the spiritual void in me, but the imagined event suddenly seemed real.

I couldn't interpret my own thoughts. More than any other symbol, it was a whore who made me feel that I was from the capital. I didn't know whether to laugh or to cry.

We rarely got to Tirana. When we did, we tried to maintain a low profile. In the press, Party leaders called on those in rotation to strengthen their attachment to their grass roots, i.e., the working masses, rather than yearning for the capital. We were all scared that our families—our only link to Tirana—would be banished, too.

In the autumn, we were summoned to a meeting in the capital. This was the first time we'd all found ourselves together again. We stared at one another in amazement, as if we were discovering our own image in the mirror. We were not only thinner, we looked older, too. Our clothes didn't fit us, our eyes had a servile tint, and our voices were rusty.

We had come to the meeting with a certain hope: *You, comrade writers and artists, who have now passed the test, have suffered more than you should have in the countryside. Return to the capital now with your heads held high!* When we realized that the climate was exactly the opposite, we despaired. We were like mothers-in-law, unwanted, in the way. Not only was there no sympathy for us; the hostility toward us seemed to have blossomed.

Those who had prepared speeches of veiled criticism stuffed them back into their pockets and proclaimed the opposite. They thanked the Party for having opened their eyes, and revealed their plans for the future. I was horrified to hear that two of the projects mentioned resembled my own: short stories with working-class protagonists, full of joy under a blue spring sky, with none of those clouds or that damn

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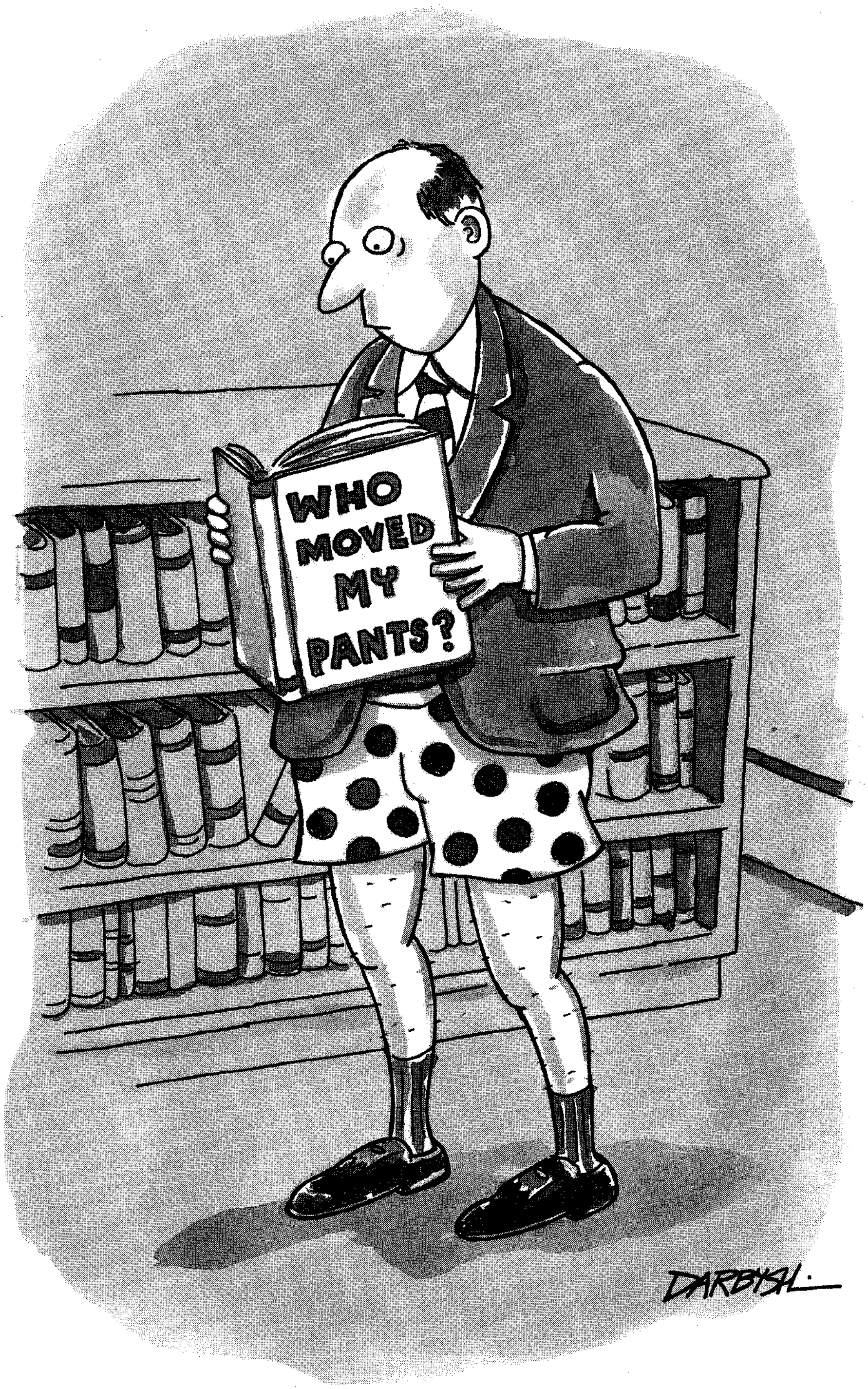
rain that had characterized my earlier attempts.

Nobody knew anything about "The Bedridden Gypsy." I was pretty sure I had kept quiet about it, although one evening at the Barrel Bar, as a few young poets and I were drinking and talking about literary innovation, I'd started boasting that they would be bowled over by the chapter of my new novel in which the Gypsy begins to scratch, and the sentences get so muddled as to confuse even a dermatologist.



Despite all our promises to produce a more genuinely Socialist literature, the faces of the members of the presidium remained sombre. We realized why when one of them, the Secretary of the Party Committee for Tirana, took the floor. He stated that the Party remained dissatisfied with the country's writers and artists. It had extended a loving hand to them, but they had not shown their gratitude. Two playwrights had once more written plays full of ideological errors. One novelist had blackened Socialist reality again in his latest work. The colors used by certain painters were decadent. This showed that the class struggle in the art world had to be intensified even further. Among the examples given was the linguist E.Ç. Instead of showing gratitude for the generosity of the Party and its Leader, who had forgiven his past transgressions and had sent him once again to a linguistics congress abroad, he had repeated his former error and had again kissed the hand of that female delegate from a hostile country.

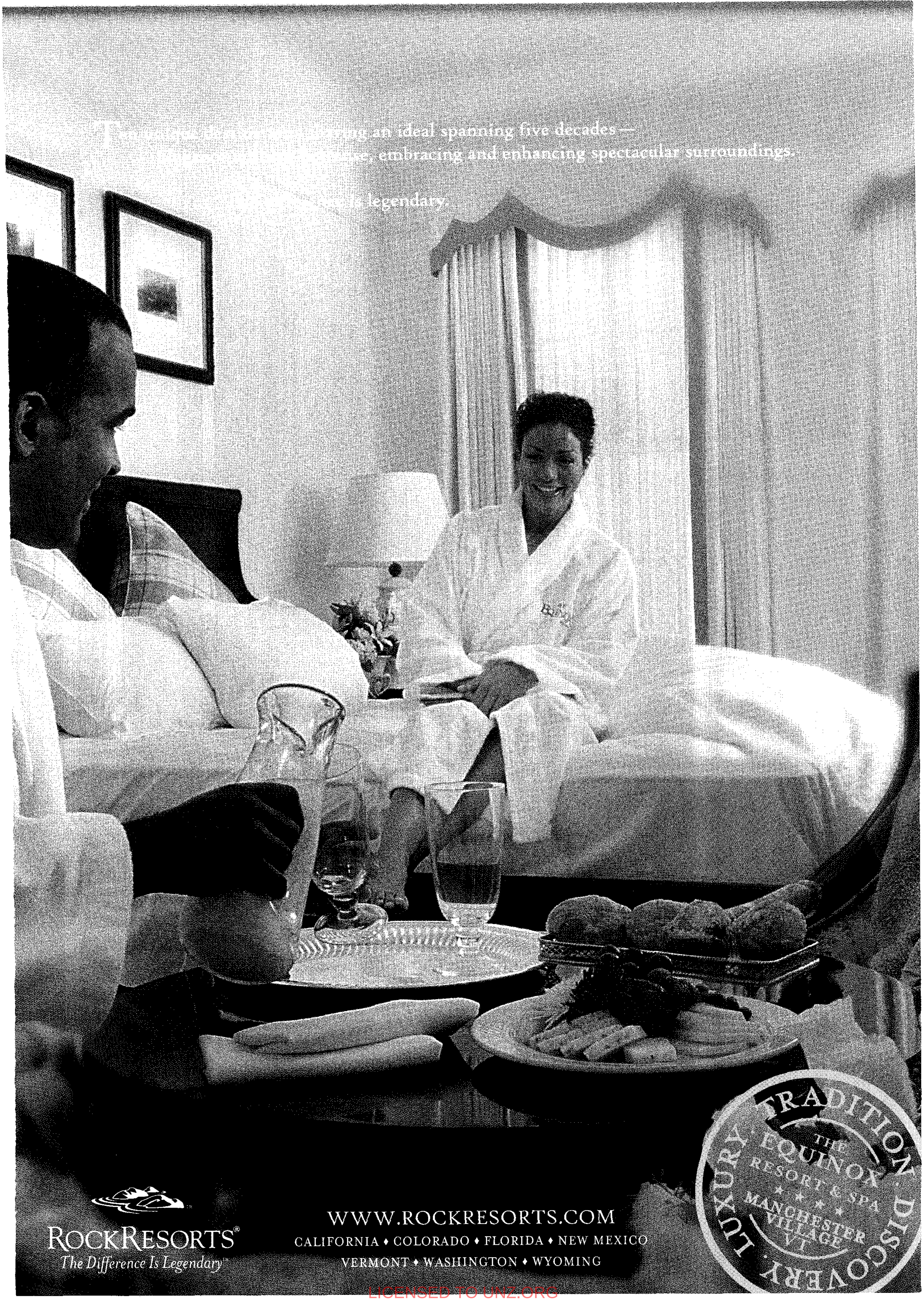
During the recess, while trying to find my colleague at the bar next to the auditorium, I made a surprising discovery. Not everyone was as depressed as I'd thought. There were even some smiling faces and merry voices. Who are all these unfamiliar people? I wondered. The new literary talents from the working class whom we had heard so much about lately? How could there be so many of them so fast? But it had to be that. I'd heard that, in such circumstances, the Sigurimi lost no time recruiting agents among the new writers, telling them, no doubt, "You are the future of literature! You are going to replace all those scoundrels the Party sent to study abroad and who returned full of vanity and corrupted by evil."

The more I observed them, the more I felt I was glimpsing covert and sarcastic smiles. Just when I thought I saw the young female poet among them, the bell announcing the start of the next session rang and everyone rushed for the doors.

The meeting continued until midnight. The next day, before returning to B., I walked around Tirana for a few hours. The yellow leaves were falling en masse along the Grand Boulevard. The outdoor cafés were now closed, but, even shuttered, they filled me with nostalgia. I thought of that sad restaurant in B. where I would be having my miserable dinner in solitude and asked myself, What is this madness?

The whole system came crashing down on me once again with a terrifying din. Why this never-ending lunacy? Why all the submissiveness and mute response? Not one voice of dissent, not one act of courage. We were disappearing just as silently as the yellow leaves of the Grand Boulevard. Just as inexorably.

As I wandered along Elbasan Road, I heard a female voice calling me. It was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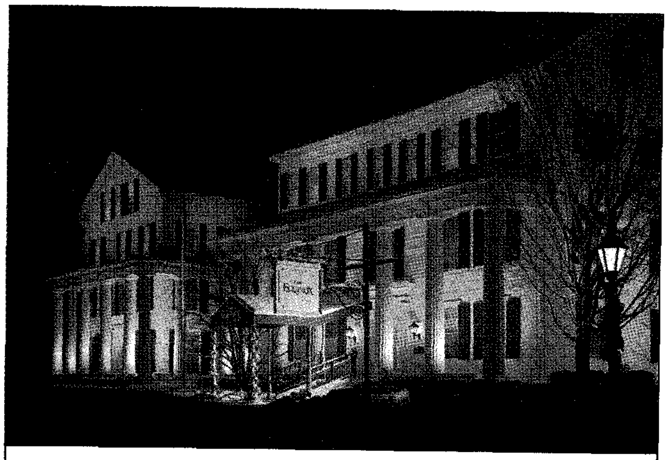

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**WINTER GETAWAYS**

in the January 23 & 30, 2006

double issue.

the poet, who was waving at me from the other side of the street.

We met. Unlike in our earlier encounters, everything about her now seemed assured: her deportment, her speech, her laugh. She must have felt a sense of superiority. In her eyes, I was nothing because I was languishing in the country. She would now have a wonderful opportunity to castigate me for the crazy stories I used to tell her.

All this flashed through my mind, and I was numbed. But that silly cow was wrong if she thought she could mess with me! That I had fallen was obvious, but I now had one advantage over her: I no longer wanted to seduce her.

"I thought you would be taking part in the discussions at the meeting yesterday," I said. "Your speech last time was very good."

"Did you think so?" she replied, batting her eyes. I had the impression that all the confidence she had gained had suddenly melted away, only to be replaced by her former naïveté.

"You know, there are still a lot of people out there throwing sand in the gears, and they never give up," I continued. "You know what I heard today? Some fool who is setting up a condom factory had the gall to propose the name of our national hero Scanderbeg for the first Albanian-made condom."

She blushed, not knowing where to look.

"I don't understand all this nonsense," she muttered. "How can they profane our national hero? Will they never learn?"

"That's exactly what I said when I heard about it. But he justified the name by saying that a condom had to be strong and resistant, and since there was no better symbol of resistance than Scanderbeg . . ."

She continued to blush. Somewhat confused, she shook my hand and we said goodbye. For a moment, I watched her walking away, then I regretted the little trick I had played on her and headed off in the opposite direction.

That afternoon, I took the train back to B. The first frost of the year was covering the fields, and I tried to concentrate on nothing at all. Just when I thought I had achieved this, my thoughts returned to the venomous accusation made by one high official: "We who made writers of you are the guilty ones!"

In a moment of anger, they had let it be known what they really thought of us. Strangely enough, instead of being furious, I felt a sense of relief. Perhaps we were not actually writers but only writer-substitutes, just like the ersatz powder that had replaced coffee during the war years. Just like the hundreds of other cheap imitations we had got used to since then.

The monotonous clanking of the train had almost put me to sleep. A cup of coffee at three o'clock in the morning tried to penetrate my dream, but didn't succeed. Something was preventing it.

The winter was more depressing than ever. It wasn't just the damp and the chill that got to me. The long story I was writing seemed stillborn. Like someone who changes his religion, I had turned my back on the winter climate in order to worship at the altar of spring. But the old god reigned supreme and, insulted by my betrayal, he wreaked his vengeance upon me: I had a series of colds and bronchitis attacks, one after the other.

The afternoons were interminable, as were the evenings, with the usual comings and goings of the two sisters, the freezing-cold restaurant, and the occasional game of cards before bed. But the engineers had been warned that it was not their job to organize social evenings.

The news we received from the capital was distressing. There was no mention of the fate of Albanian writers in the international press, or even in the Albanian émigré press. The last private café in Tirana had been closed down. A new wave of rotations was being prepared for the end of December.

One night, I woke up quite suddenly. I thought that someone had woken me, but there wasn't a sound—no one was knocking at the door. Through the window, the full moon gave off a strange, harsh light, like glass, as if, inert for millions of years, it were now coming back to life. I went to the window and studied the sky.

It was three in the morning. Without thinking about what I was doing, I began to get dressed. I opened the door quietly and tiptoed down the stairs. It was the first time that I had ever gone out alone at this hour of the night. The town stretched out before me, lifeless and glittering, like a tombstone. The moon was

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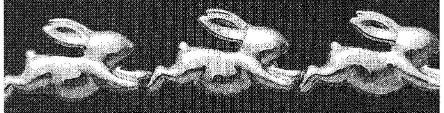

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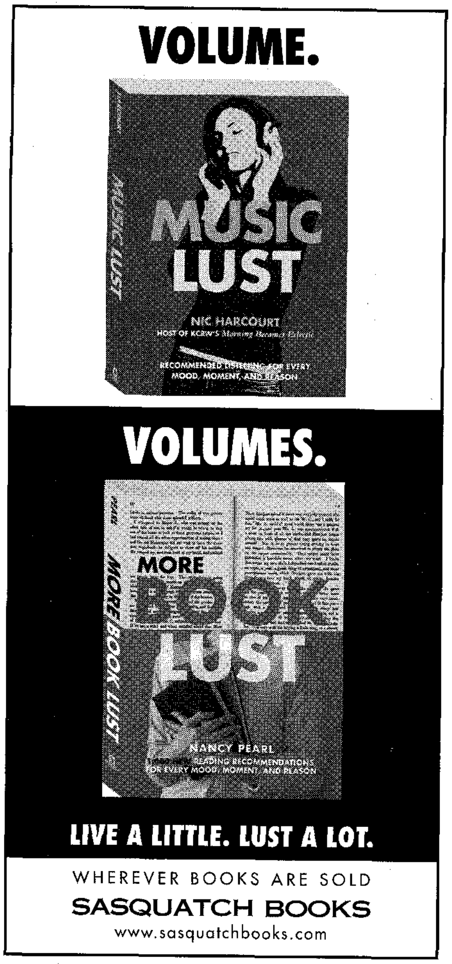
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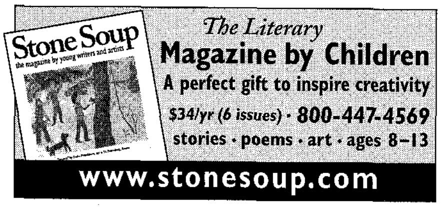
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still bright, but it seemed friendlier now than it had in my room.

I walked down the road toward a little stone bridge, which was silhouetted in white like an abandoned stage set.

A sudden sense of lightness filled me, a drunkenness I had never experienced before. It was an unusual intoxication, the cause of which I couldn't quite make out. It flitted through the recesses of my mind only to shy away again like a frightened doe. But the hope it left behind filled my chest with fresh air. The hard times we were going through would certainly end one day. The last café in Tirana may have been nationalized, but there were other emblems and symbols that would continue to resist and survive.

I stopped short and asked myself, "But what emblems and what symbols?"

I couldn't think of any. But I was somehow aware of their existence, hidden in the fog, waiting for their time to come. People and places were perhaps just shadows, but behind them there were figures who were following other principles and codes. Yes, the last private café had been shut down, but at three in the morning one coffee was still being served, to someone still addressed as "Sir," at Marguerite's bedside.

In a flash, I saw in my mind a flag being hoisted over the President's residence, emblazoned with all sorts of symbols, from an eagle to a lady's black garters. This chaotic vision slowly organized itself. There in Tirana, in the capital of the country of which I was a citizen, instead of a flag waving above the President's house to show that the head of state was present, instead of the emblems of the Dukagjin, Kastriot, or Angevin dynasties, with all their white, black, and blue one-headed and bicephalous eagles, I saw a new symbol that coincidence had raised before my eyes: Marguerite's black garters flying in the wind.

All the tension in me melted away, and I returned to my room and my bed. I didn't even have the strength to close the curtains and, as I was falling asleep, I felt the rays of the alabaster moon caress my face as if forming a death mask.

I returned to Tirana two days before New Year's.

The city seemed alien and off kilter to me. I walked down a few side streets hoping to run into someone I knew, but encountered no one. Everyone was probably in hiding.

I went to a post office I had never entered before and called my colleague, hoping that he, too, had returned to spend New Year's with his family. At first his mother—I recognized her voice—told me that he wasn't there. But when she realized who I was she called him to the phone.

A little later, we were out on the street together in our long winter coats, panting in the cold and exchanging the latest news, primarily about banished colleagues and friends. "There is no sign of a thaw," he said. "On the contrary."

As I was lighting a second cigarette, he asked me, "Did you hear what happened to Marguerite?"

"No," I replied. "What happened to her?"

Quite a bit of time had passed since we'd spoken of her, and I had a bad premonition.

"They expelled the two of them, mother and daughter," he said. "They expelled everyone from Tirana whom they considered immoral: prostitutes, gamblers, homosexuals. But that's not all," he continued. "Their expulsion ended in tragedy."

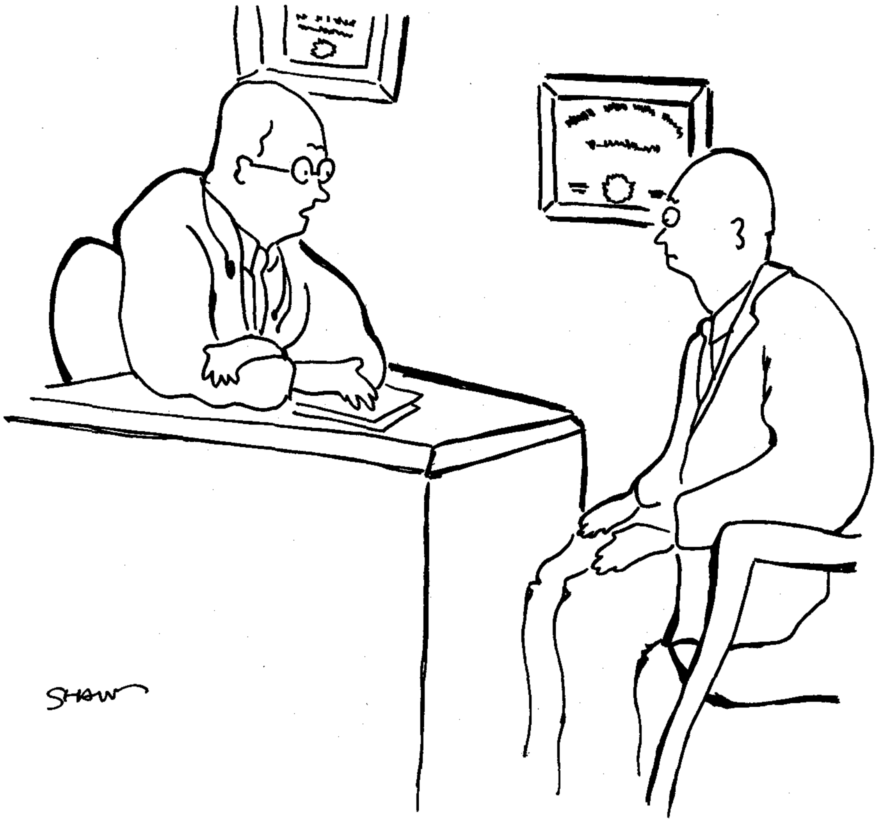
"Tragedy? What do you mean? What tragedy?"

"Marguerite and her mother," he said. "They both committed suicide."

I was speechless, unable to react at all. Without waiting for me to question him, in a weary voice he told me what had happened.

"The two of them were loaded onto a truck with all their baggage and sent to some backwater in the province of Lushnje. There they were told that they were going to be reëducated by working for a coöperative, and they were given a little cabin to live in. They didn't say a word. They put their baggage in the cabin and went out that same afternoon to buy some things at the *kolkhoz* store. Apparently, they also bought some detergent and a rope. That evening, after they had finished dinner and had their coffee, they hanged themselves. Marguerite probably helped her mother before hanging herself."

As he spoke, I began counting the days, trying to figure out exactly when



*"You're clinically boring."*

they had died. My brain went numb. I was convinced that they had killed themselves the very night I'd had my revelation in the moonlight. Yes, it must have been that night, as the full moon was spilling its light across all of narrow Albania, from west to east.

I thought about the emaciated bodies of the writers in their loose shirts on the last day of meetings and how none of them had committed suicide.

A woman had done it for all of us.

Some mysterious thread linked the loose knots of our ties to her marble-white neck, which allowed me eventually, in my imagination, to hold the Albanian Union of Writers and Artists up to her naked body like a mirror.

Soon thereafter, as if it could not withstand the reflection, the Writers' Union moved its headquarters to Kavaja Street, where it has been ever since.

Years later, as I stood in front of the modern building in the glass façade of which was reflected the Cathedral of Amiens, I thought about that woman in distant Tirana.

I had long been preparing myself for this moment.

Like everything that needs a soul to live, this dead building was making use of the cathedral's outer shell. It changed its moods with the passage of hours and seasons. It was not the same at dawn and at nightfall, in April and in autumn or in winter. It opened and closed like a living organism.

Any other house that stood opposite a building inhabited by poets and artists would have derived its light and soul from the latter. But in the case of the Writers' Union it was Marguerite's abandoned home that was the cathedral.

It is difficult to imagine that, in her moments of quiet solitude, Marguerite ever took any comfort from Albanian literature. On the contrary, as a woman who had learned only to give, and who did so to the very end, she bequeathed something to it.

This belated tribute is for you, Marguerite. ♦

(*Translated, from the Albanian, by Robert Elsie, with the editorial contribution of David Bellos.*)

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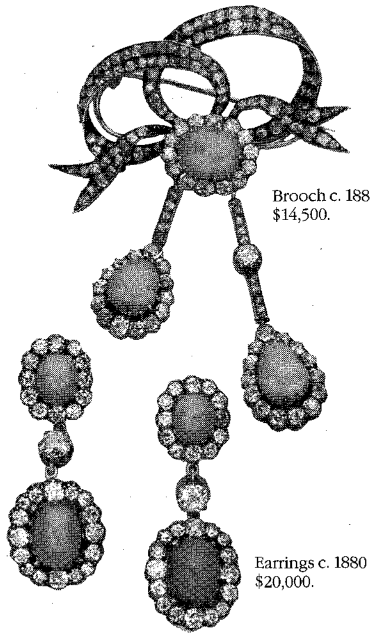
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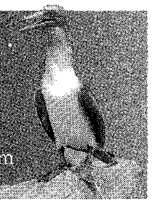
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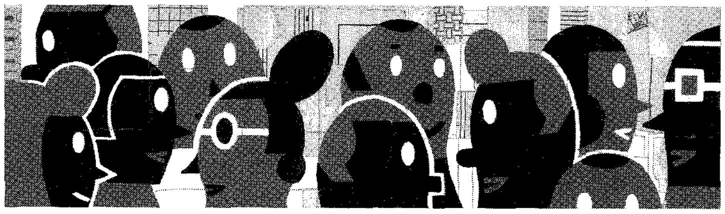


### A CRITIC AT LARGE

# IN FROM THE COLD

*The return of Knut Hamsun.*

### BY JEFFREY FRANK

I lived for a time in Copenhagen, trying to learn Danish, and that's when I discovered the Norwegian writer Knut Hamsun, whose career was one of the strangest of the last century. Hamsun is not so well known in America—perhaps the curse of a minor language—but his influence is certainly felt; Isaac Bashevis Singer argued that "the whole modern school of fiction in the twentieth century stems from Hamsun, just as Russian literature in the nineteenth century 'came out of Gogol's greatcoat.' " In Scandinavia, though, Hamsun meant trouble. During those months in Copenhagen, I occasionally walked into one of the antiquarian bookstores that could be found all over the city's Latin Quarter. Several times when I asked about Hamsun's works, the man behind the counter (it was always a man) would shake his head and declare, "He was a traitor!" I'd try to remember the shop so as not to embarrass myself again.

I knew what that was about, of course. During the German occupation of Norway in the Second World War, Hamsun had been a collaborator; he had met Goebbels and Hitler, and was unrepentant to the end. It was baffling: how could the man who wrote "Hunger," "Mysteries," and "Pan"—those surpassingly original books—have had any sympathy for Nazis? Hamsun was not some bitter second-rater. He had won the Nobel Prize in 1920, and, unlike other Fascist sympathizers, such as Céline and Pound, he had a deep and lasting grip on his public, that of an enchanter. Singer admitted to being "hypnotized" by him; Hesse called him his favorite writer; Hemingway recommended his novels to Scott Fitzgerald; Gide compared him to Dostoyevsky, but believed that Hamsun was "perhaps even more subtle." The list of those who loved his sly, anarchic voice is long.

Half a century after Hamsun's death, his politics and, especially, his wartime behavior remain confounding. But, with the recent publication, in Norway, of a two-volume biography by Ingar Sletten Kolloen, of nearly a thousand pages, he no longer seems quite so elusive. And, if there is not yet a Hamsun revival, certainly a Hamsun reëmergence is under way. Books that were never available in English, such as a bizarre journal about a half-imagined journey to the Caucasus ("In Wonderland"), some of the short stories, the "wanderer" novels of middle age, and even some early journalism, have recently appeared in translation, along with new editions of his most famous books. Two competing English versions of both "Hunger" and "Pan" are available, and last month Penguin issued a fresh translation of "Victoria." In Norway and Denmark, early editions of Hamsun are fetching ever-higher prices, though these are mostly the books he wrote long before the rise of Fascism.

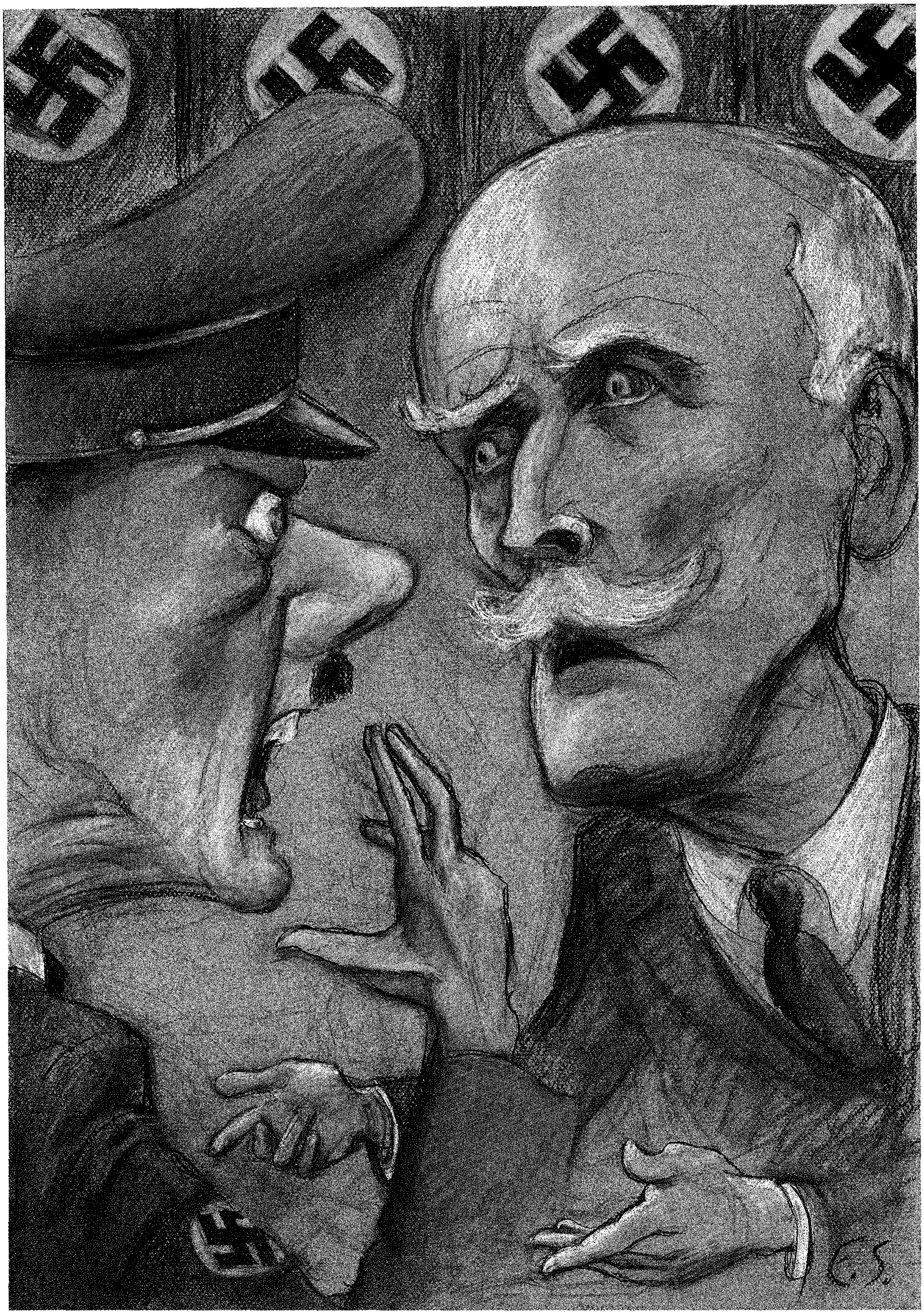
The Scandinavian countries, in a period of less than a century, produced an extraordinary body of literature; an abbreviated list includes Hans Christian Andersen, Søren Kierkegaard, Jens Peter Jacobsen, August Strindberg, Henrik Ibsen, and Sigrid Undset. None of them were so beguiling as Hamsun, though, whose works include twenty novels, six plays, two volumes of poetry, and three collections of stories. Most compelling are the early novels, and, in particular, "Hunger"—a sort of hallucinatory "New Grub Street," overheated, half-crazed, and funny.

A hint of the novel's existence came in 1888, when one of its four sections appeared in a short-lived Danish literary journal called *Ny Jord* ("New Ground"). The author was listed as "Anonymous," but the tiny Dano-Norwegian literary community quickly learned his name. Hamsun, not yet thirty, was suddenly a man to be reckoned with, and more so when, a year later, he published his first book, "From the Cultural Life of Modern America," a rude, amusing, and occasionally stupid attack on the New World, which the critic Georg Brandes (Nietzsche's early champion) praised highly. When "Hunger" came out, in 1890, Hamsun informed reviewers that he was trying something different; he was not, he insisted, interested in marriages and balls—the book was not really a novel at all. Rather, as he told a friend, "What interests me are my little soul's endless emotions, the special, strange life of the mind, the mysteries of the nerves in a hungry body."

Hamsun's narrator, a writer, is a careful cataloguer of his own psychological states—no victim but, like Hamsun himself, a subversive, generational voice. Not a great deal happens, and yet from the first line—"It was in that time when I walked around hungry in Kristiania, that strange city no one can leave without being marked by it"—the novel's oddly joyful desperation never flags. Poor, ambitious freelance writers in Western cities may no longer be starving, but certainly they suffer the same humiliations as Hamsun's narrator: editors pay them

EDWARD SOREL

*The notorious meeting with Hitler grew less cordial as Hamsun presented his complaints. "Shut up!" Hitler finally erupted.*



very little, make them wait endlessly for a reply, and are indifferent to their enormous God-given talents. More than once, Hamsun's famished hero finds that his "nervous state had gotten out of hand," as when, at one point, he is unable to sleep:

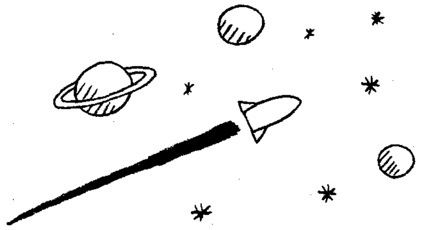
> Suddenly I snap my fingers several times and laugh. What the hell was this! Ha! I imagined I had found a new word. I sit up in bed and say, It's not found in the language, I have invented it—*Kuboå*. It does have letters like a word—sweet Jesus, man, you have invented a word . . . *Kuboå* . . . of enormous grammatical importance.
>
> The word stood out sharply against the darkness in front of me.
>
> I sit with open eyes, amazed at my discovery and laughing for joy. Then I start whispering: they might be spying on me and I intended to keep my invention a secret. I had crossed over into the pure madness of hunger.

The first section ends with the narrator in a state of near-bliss after getting ten kroner for a feuilleton, but his overall situation does not seem likely to improve. The novel breaks grammatical rules, tenses skip around, and the narrator seems increasingly unhinged. By the end, when the narrator boards a ship, it is as if Hamsun had parted the curtain of the nineteenth century and were peering into the absurdities of the twentieth.

"Hunger" was a literary sensation, although the critical response was mixed. Hamsun naturally hoped that Brandes, a voice of modernism, would become an ally, but Brandes found the book monotonous, a judgment so painful to Hamsun that he wrote to him, saying, "I don't feel completely alone without you—but without your understanding, it's useless for me to continue." He believed that Brandes hadn't read enough of the novel: "If we add it up I don't think you'd find more psychical emotions in 'Raskolnikov' than in my book." Brandes and others, however, were beginning to realize that Hamsun not only was an uncomfortable fit with his time but was in many ways an impossible, perhaps even a dangerous, figure.

Knut Hamsun—baptized Knud Pedersen—was born in 1859 in rural central Norway. Three years later, the family moved to Hamarøy, north of the Arctic Circle, to work at Hamsund, a farm that belonged to his uncle. Hamsun did not attend school until he was nine, and then not for very long; his childhood was isolated and miserable. His uncle, whom he later described as "a confirmed bachelor, stingy and hot-tempered," beat him with a ruler and otherwise abused him; but he was also in charge of the local library, and Hamsun more or less taught himself Norwegian, which then, in its written form, was almost identical to Danish. His modest background and his lack of formal education were points of both great sensitivity and pride; in a letter to Brandes many years later, he asked, "What does someone like me know—born a peasant-farmer, without a degree in anything, unable to afford to sit and read philosophy?"

In his precocious late teens, Hamsun had two clumsy stories published in very limited editions, and, on the strength of this, he asked a wealthy Norwegian merchant named Erasmus B. K. Zahl for financial backing. He was, he wrote, "no one's favorite, with nothing but ordinary schooling," and yet "I've managed to bring my knowledge-thirsty soul a little higher than my just-as-unprivileged equals." To Hamsun's shock, Zahl sent him sixteen hundred kroner, then worth about four hundred dollars. Still, the money didn't go very far, and Hamsun struggled to survive, mostly in Copenhagen, which at the time was the center of cultural gravity in Scandinavia. In the eighteen-eighties, he twice made his way to America. He stopped in New York, where he was amazed by an elevated railway that went "up in the air, above the people's houses," but he stayed mainly in Wisconsin and Minnesota. He also spent eight months in Chicago as a cable-car conductor, and worked on a large farm in the Dakota Territory, a setting for several early stories. Hamsun's opinion of the country was mixed. He saw it as overwhelmed by materialism and excessive patriotism, and at one point he wore a black ribbon in support of four anarchists sentenced to hang after the Haymarket bombing, in Chicago. But he admired the principles expressed in the Declaration of Independence. And he admired Mark Twain, whom he saw give a lecture in New York, and from whom he certainly learned a great deal about the use of the vernacular. Hamsun went home in the summer of 1888 and never returned.



A year after the publication of "Hunger," Hamsun set out on the lecture circuit in Norway, brazenly attacking the older literary generation; a particular target was Ibsen, who was then sixty-three and had just returned after twenty-seven years abroad. When Hamsun spoke in Kristiania (now Oslo), Ibsen had a front-row seat, and was joined by, among others, the composer Edvard Grieg, the Polar explorer Fridtjof Nansen, and a young concert pianist, Hildur Andersen, who had become Ibsen's consort. Half an hour into the talk, as Kolloen describes it, Hamsun let loose, accusing Ibsen of bringing a "coarse and spurious" psychological understanding to the stage. Ibsen, for his part, just sat there, impassively. (He is believed to have had Hamsun in mind when he wrote "The Master Builder," published the following year. The play is about an aging architect who is terrified of being outdone by the new generation. "I've begun to grow afraid—so awfully afraid—of the young," he says.)

Hamsun was by then the very portrait of a young artist, complete with pince-nez; a contemporary described him as "dangerous for all women, interesting and striking." One gets glimpses of this in his second novel, "Mysteries" (1892)—an apt title for one of his oddest and richest books. Everything about it is a little mysterious, from the moment "a stranger appeared in town, a certain Nagel, a remarkable, eccentric charlatan who did a lot of curious things." It's not clear why Nagel is there or what he's getting out of staying. He falls obsessively in love with Dagny Kielland, a clergyman's daughter, and has an affair with an older woman; he carries a violin case, but there's almost certainly no violin inside. He is probably borderline insane, and definitely suicidal; although the novel has a third-person narrator, it is every bit as inflamed as "Hunger." Hamsun's able English-born biographer Robert Ferguson quotes Hamsun's own description of the book: "The hero of 'Mysteries' is a poseur, a

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JOHNNY COHEN

*"I'll just be a minute—I'm learning Spanish."*

• •

pathological phenomenon, who is part madman and part genius"—which sounds very much like the author. The novel is somewhat disjointed; irrational monologues alternate with discussions of Marx or Tolstoy or Ibsen, whose plays, not surprisingly, are dismissed by Nagel as "dramatized wood pulp."

The reviews, again, were mixed; one critic said that Hamsun "hadn't given up the sickly hallucinations of 'Hunger,' " and he was labelled an opportunistic copier of modern Russian literature. Today, one can recognize in "Mysteries" the shape and spirit of the modern novel, produced at a time when the modern novel did not yet exist. Hamsun's next two books, "Editor Lynge" and "Shallow Soil," were romans à clef—the first about an unloved newspaper editor and the second a disparaging look at the artistic community in Kristiania—and deserve the obscurity into which they have fallen. But then came "Pan," published in 1894, a short, sexy, lyrical novel filled with hints of the supernatural. Hamsun, in his flawed English, described "Pan" with considerable accuracy in a letter to its German publisher, Albert Langen: "Think of the Nordland in Norway, this regions of the Lapper, the mysteries, the grand superstitions, the midnight-sun, think of J. J. Rousseau in the regions, making acquaintance with a Nordlands girl—that is my book." It's told as a memoir by one Thomas Glahn, who has moved to the northern woods with his dog, Aesop, and becomes romantically entangled with Edvarda, the daughter of a rich local merchant. Glahn, with his "animal eyes," is, like Nagel, drawn to irrational acts.

At one point, Edvarda compares Glahn unfavorably with a rival, a lame physician. "Even if you were lame, on top of everything, you couldn't hold your own against him," she insists. Glahn later begins to brood:

> No, even if I was lame on top of everything, I couldn't hold my own against the Doctor, could I? I definitely wouldn't be able to hold my own against him; those were her words. . . .
>
> Standing in the middle of the floor, I cock my gun, place the muzzle against my left instep, and pull the trigger. The shot pierces the middle of my foot and goes through the floor. Aesop gives a short, frightened yelp.

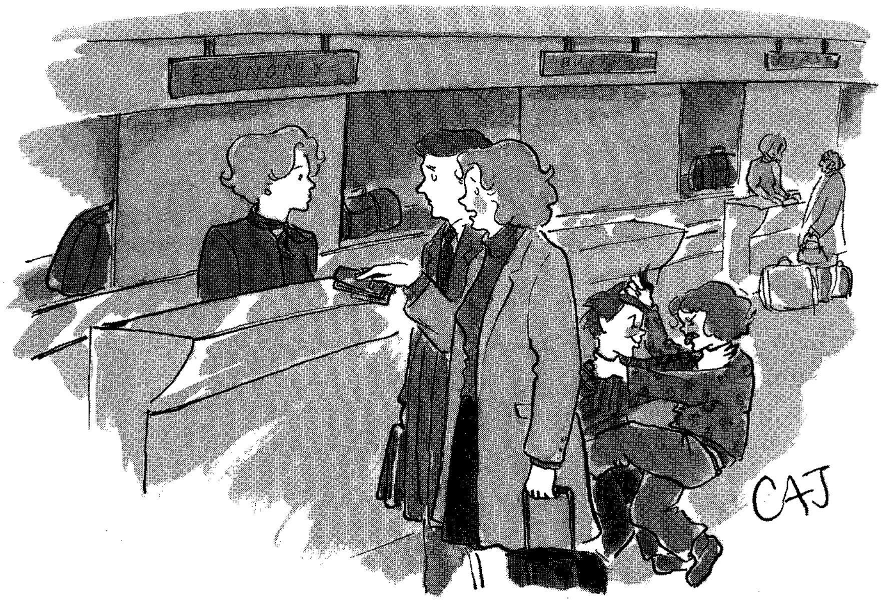
"Pan" is like that; Glahn and Edvarda torment themselves as much as they torment each other—Glahn does things like tossing one of Edvarda's shoes into the water "whether for joy at her being so near or from some urge to assert myself and remind her of my existence." Among the surprises of the book is its structure, which includes an epilogue, "Glahn's Death," told by a second narrator, who seems to belong to another novel entirely. No matter; Glahn's narrative and Glahn's death somehow belong together. Hamsun wrote to Langen that "every chapter is a poem, every line worked hard on," and every page, he thought, was "havey of thoughts and fantasi."

Hamsun's next novel, "Victoria," an overwrought, dazzling, painfully class-conscious, and lugubrious romance about a miller's son who loves an aristocrat's daughter, came four years later—just after Hamsun married Bergljot Bech, the daughter of a socially prominent Norwegian family—and was Hamsun's first real financial success. It was six more years before his next novel, the slight "Dreamers," appeared, and after that Hamsun's career began to take a somewhat different path.

Ingar Sletten Kolloen is the first Hamsun biographer to have full access to the Hamsun archive, and in Norway his book set off intense discussion about the writer's collaboration and about his treatment by the authorities after the war. Kolloen is particularly good on Hamsun's personal life: his second marriage, roiled by jealousy and fury, to the actress Marie Andersen, when he was forty-nine and she was twenty-seven; and his relationship with his children, a daughter with Bergljot and two sons and two daughters with Marie. One gets glimpses of Hamsun's interest in world affairs, but it is a rather narrow interest: a belief in the destiny of Germany, and, for reasons that no one has ever quite figured out, a hatred of England. Robert Ferguson notes that Hamsun had nurtured this prejudice from his youth, and one can only suppose that a few personal encounters helped him form a view of an entire nation; as Kolloen and others have remarked, the British were to Hamsun what the Jews were to the Nazis. Englishmen appear in arrogant walk-on roles in several of his books. In the middle of "In Wonderland," Hamsun recalls a Munich streetcar ride: "A little girl . . . falls, gets in between the horses and is trampled, hurt. But we manage to pull her out alive. Meanwhile the Brit is smoking his pipe. When it's all over and the driver delays a moment before going on, the Brit looks at his watch in irritation," and asks for a refund of his fare. In two novels, "Benoni" and "Rosa," a caricatured Englishman meets and then marries Edvarda, the girl from "Pan," and in "The Last Joy," from 1912, Hamsun couldn't contain himself: "England will soon have to establish old folks' homes for its children, most likely. It unsexes its people with sports and fixed ideas; if Germany hadn't kept it in a state of perpetual uneasiness, it would have turned to pederasty in a couple of generations." Possibly, these views became amplified over the years—during the First World War and afterward—for another, more selfish reason: England never really went for Hamsun's books, while the German reading public adored him from the start.

In the new century, Hamsun seemed to mourn his life in the previous one; in the spring of 1907, he delivered a lecture, "Honor the Young," in which, nearing fifty, he denounced the Fourth Commandment and, with it, his parents' generation. (Kolloen notes that Hamsun was so busy with this lecture that he didn't have time to travel to Hamarøy for his father's funeral.) After "The Last Joy," as if acknowledging that he was no longer a reliably youthful narrator, Hamsun abandoned the first-person voice entirely; with "Segelfoss Town," in 1915, he began to write bloated two-volume novels, set in small towns populated by tramps, peddlers, shopkeepers, and bureaucrats. By far the most successful of these was "Growth of the Soil," published in 1917—an epic saga about the tribulations and joys of Isak, a farmer-settler, and Inger, a woman with a harelip with whom he makes a life.

"Growth of the Soil" was a worldwide sensation; in Norway, a first printing of eighteen thousand copies sold out in about three weeks—an extraordinary number in a country with a population under three million—and almost from the day of publication there were rumors that Hamsun would win the Nobel Prize in Literature. When no literature prize was awarded in 1918, the betting was that he would get it in 1919, when he turned sixty, but that year the Swedish Academy chose a Swiss, Carl Spitteler, known for his four-volume "Olympian Spring." When Hamsun won, in 1920, it was chiefly because of "Growth of the Soil," which the Academy saw as a lesson of "heroic struggle." The book has its share of darkness—a central event is the murder of an infant—but it was above all a celebration of simple rural virtues. It also may strike readers today as the sort of self-important novel that the young Hamsun would have mocked. "The long, long path over the marshes and into the woods—who has been there?" it begins portentously. "Man, a man, the first one who was there. There was no path before him." Hamsun by then no longer enjoyed public appearances, and he went almost reluctantly to the ceremony, in Stockholm, where, in a curious echo of his "Honor the Young" pronouncements, he said something very sad and very strange: "What I should really like to do right now, in the full blaze of lights, before this illustrious assembly, is to shower every one of you with gifts, with flowers, with offerings of poetry—to be young once more, to ride on the crest of the wave. . . . Today riches and honors have been lavished on me, but one gift has been lacking, the most important one of all, the only one that matters, the gift of youth."



*"Excuse me, but for some reason you have us travelling with our kids."*

In the nineteen-seventies, a Dane named Thorkild Hansen wrote "Processen mod Hamsun" ("Hamsun's Trial"), a three-volume study that more or less concluded that Hamsun's Nazism was a result of old age (Hamsun was eighty-one in April of 1940, when the Germans invaded); of deafness (even the radio was relatively useless to him); of isolation (he was living at Nørholm, his estate in southern Norway); and of the influence of his wife, Marie, whose enthusiasm for Nazi Germany is well documented. Robert Ferguson's 1987 biography more or less endorsed the idea that Hamsun never fully understood the vileness to which he lent his name, a comforting view to people like me, who not only loved Hamsun but could not believe that his sympathies for the occupiers went very deep. (The excellent 1996 movie "Hamsun," in which Max von Sydow plays the elderly Hamsun, takes this view.) But Kolloen shows that it was more complicated than that.

As Hamsun's opinions became all too public during the nineteen-thirties, he seemed to realize that the artist and the polemicist needed to be separated if both were to thrive. In 1936, when Hamsun was seventy-seven, his last novel, "The Ring Is Closed," was published, and reviewers noted with some relief that it was, simply, a novel—that, despite everything, the artist had remained true to his art. But his admirers had watched with some alarm as his politics evolved; many found it unforgivable when, in the mid-thirties, he attacked the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to the anti-Nazi journalist Carl von Ossietzky, who had been tortured and imprisoned by his fellow-Germans. Even worse, he supported Vidkun Quisling, the Norwegian defense minister who founded the pro-Fascist National Union Party, in 1933. Though that could be tolerated, barely, as a nasty id-

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iosyncrasy, everything changed after the Germans invaded on April 9, 1940, and Hamsun urged his countrymen to throw down their weapons and coöperate.

The Nazi occupiers became increasingly pitiless, and increasingly clever at manipulating their trophy, Hamsun, who several times tried to rescue individual countrymen, almost always without success. When Hamsun's publisher, Harald Grieg, asked for his help in winning the release of a writer whom the Gestapo had arrested, Hamsun arranged a meeting with Josef Terboven, the Reich Commissioner in Norway. Terboven shuffled papers and toyed with Hamsun before saying no; they parted with mutual loathing. The Oslo newspapers, though, showed pictures of Hamsun in a seemingly cheerful meeting with the Reich Commissioner, and Hamsun certainly realized that he had been used.

Hamsun did not endorse Hitler's racial policies, and, as Kolloen points out, he was in friendly contact with Jews all his life, including Georg Brandes and his favorite publisher, Christian Kønig. Still, he was a man of his time and once suggested, not precisely in the spirit of the Balfour Declaration, that it might benefit everyone if the Jewish people had their own country. Two of Hamsun's children—his son Tore, an artist, and his daughter, Ellinor, who studied acting—lived in Berlin in the late nineteen-thirties, although not, apparently, with much enthusiasm for what was going on. When Hamsun visited them in February of 1938, they were living in a Jewish neighborhood, and had Jewish friends. Tore was particularly close to Max Tau, a publisher, who had met the Hamsuns in Oslo; with Hamsun's help, Tau was rescued from the Nazis.

Hamsun's meeting with Hitler—recreated by, among others, Thorkild Hansen, Ferguson, and Kolloen—took place at Berghof on June 26, 1943, a time when the war was going badly for the Germans. Hitler, then fifty-four and heavily medicated, was not in top form. Nor was Hamsun; he had suffered at least one minor stroke and his hearing had worsened. After Hitler asked Hamsun about his writing habits, adding that he personally preferred working in the evening, he took Hamsun to his study, where they were served tea, and it was agreed that Egil Holmboe, a Norwegian, would do the translating. (Hitler's usual interpreter, Ernst Züchner, took notes behind a curtain.) Hitler apparently hoped that the writer would inspire him, cheer him up, and perhaps talk about genius, a theme that always interested him. "I feel, if not entirely connected to you, that my life resembles yours very much in certain ways," Hitler said at one point. But Hamsun had no desire to talk about writing, or art, or genius. He wanted to talk about politics, and about the viciousness of the Occupation. In particular, he wanted Hitler to fire Josef Terboven. He began by complaining that Terboven was clamping down on Norwegian shipping routes, and when Hitler tried to cut off this line of discussion Hamsun went on, "Furthermore, the Reich Commissioner on several occasions has said that in the future there won't be any place called Norway."

"Unlike other occupied countries," Hitler told Hamsun, "Norway has got its own government."

"Everything that happens in Norway is being decided by the Reich Commissioner!" Hamsun replied, and he tried to explain that Terboven was ruining Hitler's reputation. Eventually, Hamsun did something unheard of: he interrupted Hitler. The Reich Commissioner's methods "don't work with us, we can't stand his Prussianness," Hamsun said. "And then the executions! We've had it!"

Züchner, behind the curtain, knew that Holmboe had not translated the last outburst. When Hitler began to speak, Hamsun interrupted again: "Terboven doesn't want a free Norway, but a protectorate—that's the prospect he gives us." Then he had a question: "Will he ever be recalled?"

Hitler tried to close the subject, saying, "The Reich Commissioner is a warrior, he's only there for war-related duties."

Soon Hamsun began to weep. "It's not that we're against the Occupation," he told Hitler. "We'll need that for a while. But that man is destroying more for us than Hitler can rebuild!" Again, Holmboe didn't translate the riskiest part of the outburst. Rather, he turned away from Hitler and warned Hamsun, "Don't talk about that! We have the Führer's promise."

It wasn't over yet. Hitler began to talk about production, more panzer divisions, and new, secret weapons. While he was speaking, Hamsun tried several more times to break in, saying that he hadn't come all this way for the honor of it. When Hitler repeated that one could see Germany's good will in the fact that Norway had its own government, Hamsun, in despair, interrupted and said, "We're talking to a wall!" Holmboe, Kolloen writes, didn't translate that, either.

Before leaving, Hamsun said, "We believe in the Führer, but his wishes are being twisted." He added, "It's not the right sort of change in Norway. It will all lead to a new war." That, too, went untranslated, but by now Hamsun had said enough for Hitler to say, "Shut up! You don't understand a thing!" Hitler walked out and Hamsun wept again; he was particularly upset that Hitler hadn't personally said goodbye. Later, Hitler screamed at his aides, "I don't want to see that sort of person here anymore!"

Hamsun's reputation was in ruins; not only had he seen Hitler but, in a sickeningly misguided moment earlier that year, he had given Goebbels his Nobel Prize medal. His postwar fate was already under discussion. In November, 1944, in Moscow, Vyacheslav Molotov, the Soviet foreign minister, discussed Hamsun's case with Terje Wold, the Norwegian justice minister in exile, and Trygve Lie, the foreign minister in exile. The author of "Victoria" and "Pan" was too great an artist to be treated like a common Nazi, Molotov said, and, at such an advanced age, should be allowed to die a natural death. Wold replied, in English, "You are too soft, Mr. Molotov."

Norway was liberated in May of 1945, and the Norwegians were unforgiving toward collaborators. Terboven committed suicide before he could be shot; Quisling and other National Union leaders were executed by firing squad in October, and thousands were imprisoned, including Marie Hamsun, who got a three-year sentence and a fine. Hamsun faced treason charges, but no one knew quite what to do with the nation's greatest writer, now almost eighty-six.

Hamsun was arrested, and in the next three years he was moved to a nursing home, to the main psychiatric clinic

in Oslo, and then back to the nursing home. There are many photographs from this period, and in them Hamsun looks frail, even spectral, and sometimes puzzled. He was examined by doctors and psychiatrists, and many Norwegians took comfort in a psychiatric finding that Hamsun, though sane, was "permanently impaired" mentally. At least one newspaper reported that he was senile. Hamsun himself was offended at the idea that anyone thought his faculties were diminished. "There was nothing the matter with me, I was just old and deaf!" he later insisted. True, his eyesight was failing, and he'd had two cerebral hemorrhages, but so what? His faculties, he said, "had been severely impaired precisely by my stay at the psychiatric clinic."

During this period, Hamsun formed an acute hatred for the clinic's chief psychiatrist, Gabriel Langfeldt, who had taken an interest in his case. The psychiatrist, he observed, had come equipped "with his textbooks and his learned tomes," while the novelist "had created several hundred figures—created them internally and externally like living people, in every psychological state and nuance, in dream and action." But Hamsun hated Langfeldt mainly because he was conducting a parallel investigation with Marie Hamsun. Parts of the conversations with Marie, which touched on the most intimate issues of the Hamsuns' marriage, became part of the public court record. For Marie, this was an unconscionable betrayal of privilege; for Hamsun, the ultimate betrayal was Marie's, and he declared that he never wanted to see his wife again.

Hamsun, meanwhile, was up to something else: for the first time in years, he was writing—and keeping that a secret even from people he knew. "You've too often suggested to me that I write a book," he wrote to a friend late in 1946. "It won't happen. What can you expect of me now? I'm a wreck, and I'm well into my eighty-eighth year." Hamsun knew that people regarded him as a traitor—he was shunned when he asked a boy to take a postcard to the mailbox. But his manuscript was no apologia, even though he said of his wartime polemics, "No one told me that what I was writing was wrong, no one in the entire country." When a magistrate asked about "the murders, the terror, the torture," Hamsun said that he hadn't been allowed to read newspapers. What about Terboven, "who took direct orders from Hitler, and tortured and butchered the Norwegian people for five years?" Were the Germans a civilized people? "I didn't reply," Hamsun wrote. He challenged the authorities to find "any attack on the Jews" anywhere in his collected writings. Mainly, however, Hamsun had other subjects in mind.

The manuscript was published in 1949, when Hamsun was ninety, with the title "On Overgrown Paths," and it accomplished what he most wanted—to demonstrate his artistry and to avenge himself on Langfeldt, who appeared by name in the book, over the objections of Hamsun's longtime publisher. The "overgrown paths" referred to Hamsun's youth, and in returning to that time he did so in a first-person voice he hadn't used for nearly forty years. Hamsun, Robert Bly has said, "has a magnifying glass on his eye, like a jeweler's"; and, as he had done in youthful stories like "A Quite Ordinary Fly of Average Size," Hamsun closely observed his new surroundings, including nurses and patients and a fellow from Hamarøy who "carried his shoes over his shoulder and walked barefoot," and whose sad love story runs through the book. Hamsun recalls talking about homesickness during a visit to Helsinki fifty years earlier; he had learned the word "homesick" in America, and he transports himself to the Dakota Territory: it is the eighteen-eighties, and he has just met a farm girl named Bridget, who calls him Noot, and seems "stuck on me" until an Irishman, Patrick, comes along. Patrick falls for Bridget, but she gets involved with an elderly Austrian baker named Kleist, who makes Bridget his apprentice. And so on, until there is another, abrupt shift of mood. "It's three years since I was arrested, and here I sit," Hamsun writes, adding, "All of us are on a journey to a land that we'll reach soon enough."

The Norwegian courts fined Hamsun four hundred and twenty-five thousand kroner (then about eighty-seven thousand dollars), and he was allowed to return to Nørholm, where he went into a slow, steady decline. In the spring of 1950, urged by her children, Marie, who was then sixty-eight, came home, and, after a four-year separation, all that Hamsun said to her was "You've been gone a long time, Marie. All the time you've been gone, I've had no one to talk to but God." Few were willing to forgive him then for his wartime behavior, and it is impossible to do so today. Yet one can still watch, fascinated, as the writer makes his final turn in "On Overgrown Paths." He seems to be reaching for what he had called "the gift of youth," and in those last pages it is as if he had managed, however briefly, to retrieve it. ♦

## BOOKS

# ALL THAT GLITTERS

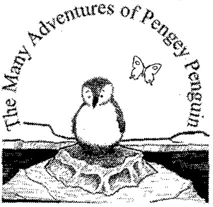
*Literature's global economy.*

BY LOUIS MENAND

In 1987, "Paco's Story," by Larry Heinemann, won the National Book Award for Fiction. The acclaim that greeted this selection was less than universal, and the reason—no fault of Heinemann's—is that 1987 was also the year of Toni Morrison's "Beloved." Morrison's novel was a finalist for the award, and it had been widely regarded as the favorite. We can assume that she was disappointed, and we know that her friends were, because, after "Beloved" also failed to win the National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction (which went to Philip Roth's "The Counterlife"), forty-eight of them published a statement in the *Times Book Review*. "Despite the international stature of Toni Morrison," they complained, "she has yet to receive the national recognition that her five major works of fiction entirely deserve: she has yet to receive the keystone honors of the National Book Award or the Pulitzer Prize. We, the undersigned black critics and black writers, here assert ourselves against such oversight and harmful whimsy. The legitimate need for our own critical voice in relation to our own literature can no longer be denied." A few months later, "Beloved" won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. Five years after that, Morrison was awarded the Nobel Prize.

James English has a lot to say about this episode in "The Economy of Prestige" (Harvard; $29.95), his ingenious analysis of the history and social function of cultural prizes and awards. He thinks that Morrison's champions crossed a tacitly accepted and well-established line when they printed their protest in the *Times*. The transgression was not the complaint that the award had been given to the wrong writer. That criticism is as old as literary prizes themselves. When the first Nobel Prize in Literature went to Sully Prudhomme, in 1901, the choice was regarded as a scandal, since Leo Tolstoy happened to be alive. The Swedish Academy was so unnerved by the public criticism it received that its members made a point of passing over Tolstoy for the rest of his life—just to show, apparently, that they knew what they were doing the first time around—honoring instead such immortals as Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, José Echegaray, Henryk Sienkiewicz, Giosuè Carducci, Rudolf Eucken, and Selma Lagerlöf. When you have prizes for art, you will always have people complaining that prizes are just politics, or that they reward in-group popularity or commercial success, or that they are pointless and offensive because art is not a competition. English believes that contempt for prizes is not harmful to the prize system; that, on the contrary, contempt for prizes is what the system is all about. "This threat of scandal," as he puts it, "is constitutive of the cultural prize." His theory is that when people make these objections to the nature of prizes they are helping to sustain a collective belief that true art has nothing to do with things like politics, money, in-group tastes, and beating out the other guy. As long as we want to believe that creative achievement is special, that a work of art is not just one more commodity seeking to aggrandize itself in the marketplace at the expense of other works of art, we need prizes so that we can complain about how stupid they are. In this respect, it is at least as important that the prize go to the wrong person as that it go to the right one. No one thinks that Tolstoy was less than a great writer because he failed to win the Nobel. The failure to win the Nobel has become, in the end, a mark of his greatness.

The Nobel Prize in Literature was the first of the major modern cultural prizes. It was soon followed by the Prix Goncourt (first awarded in 1903) and the Pulitzer Prizes (conceived in 1904, first awarded in 1917). The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences started handing out its prizes in 1929; the Emmys began in 1949, the Grammys in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1959. Since the nineteen-seventies, English says, there has been an explosion of new cultural prizes and awards. There are now more movie awards given out every year—about nine thousand—than there are new movies, and the number of literary prizes is climbing much faster than the number of books published. When a prominent figure in the cultural world—a benefactor or a distinguished critic or professor—dies, the friends and family often establish a memorial prize in his or her name. (As English points out, the friends and family often have no conception of how much even a minor award costs to administer. The price of administration, in fact, usually far outstrips the value of the prize itself. The Van Cliburn International Piano Competition costs more than three million dollars a year to run; the winners receive twenty thousand dollars.) This doesn't mean that everyone gets a ribbon. In the awards economy, the rich tend to get richer. Michael Jackson has been given more than two hundred and forty awards in his career. Steven Spielberg has ninety. "The Return of the King," the third movie in the "Lord of the Rings" trilogy, won seventy-nine prizes. English estimates that among poets John Ashbery is the leader, with at least forty-five prizes and awards. John Updike sets the pace for novelists, with thirty-nine.

English interprets the rise of the prize as part of the "struggle for power to produce value, which means power to confer value on that which does not intrinsically possess it." In an information, or "symbolic," economy, in other words, the goods themselves are physically worthless: they are mere print on a page or code on a disk. What makes them valuable is the recognition that they are valuable. This recognition is not automatic and intuitive; it has to be constructed. A work of art has to circulate through a sub-economy of exchange operated by a large and growing class of middlemen: publishers, curators, producers, publicists, philanthropists, foundation officers, critics, professors, and so on. The prize system, with its own cadre of career administrators and judges, is one of the ways in which value gets "added on" to a work. Of course, we like to think that the recognition of artistic excellence *is* intuitive. We don't like to think of cultural value as something that requires middlemen—people who are not artists themselves—in order to emerge. We prefer to believe that truly good literature or music or film announces itself. Which is another reason that we need prizes: so that we can insist that we don't really need them.

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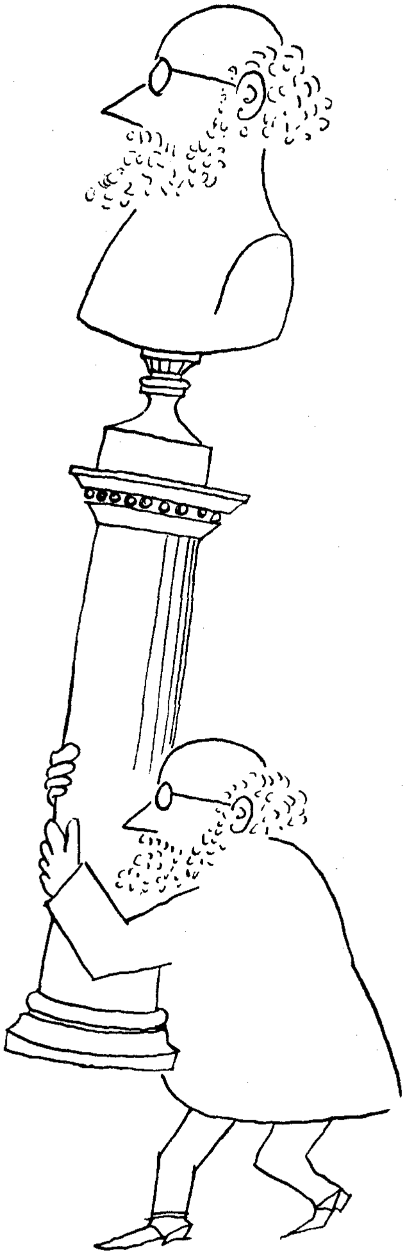
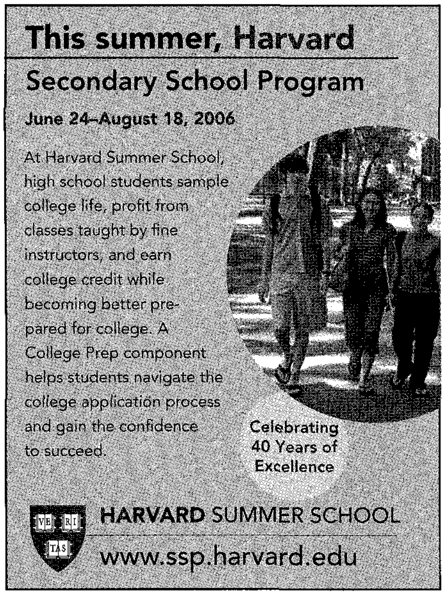


In English's view, therefore, Morrison's friends and admirers violated the protocols of prize-bashing not because they publicly criticized the choice of the National Book Award judges but because they acknowledged that the award really matters, that it is (in their words) a "keystone honor" that helps to validate a book and establish its author. Their statement pointed out, in the frankest terms, that there *is* a literary marketplace, and that power and authority—"cultural capital," to use the term that English borrows from the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu—accrue to those who succeed in it. Art does not receive its reward in Heaven; it is one of the things that belong to Caesar.

English speculates that this willingness to speak without embarrassment about the significance of prizes and awards, and about the whole economy of cultural production and consumption, may, paradoxically, signal the demise of the prize system. "As we lose our ability or our willingness to see the prize as a fundamentally scandalous institution"—scandalous because art ought to have nothing to do with winning and losing—"there is bound to be a period of painful contraction in the awards industry," he says. "Faced with the withdrawal of what has been by far their richest and most reliable source of publicity, prizes may after so many years of uncontainable expansion at last show some signs of fatigue."

Another indication that the prize system may not be working as it once did, English suggests, is that it is no longer cool to refuse an award. Once, Jean-Paul Sartre could turn down the Nobel Prize (which he did in 1964) and see a nice jump in the price of his stock as a result. Marlon Brando and Woody Allen enhanced their reputations as artists by their disrespect for the Oscars. (Of course, they had to win the thing first for the disrespect to have any value.) Today, the principled refusal of an award looks not just ungracious; it looks phony. Hollywood movies are a business—no kidding. If you're not above accepting money for acting in them, how can you pretend to be above participating in the awards ceremonies that the industry uses to sell them? According to English's theory, though, someone *has* to refuse to participate—someone has to insist that moviemaking is its own reward, that it is not about competition or material gain—for movies to retain their value in the symbolic economy.

One of the richest of the stories that English tells about the circulation of cultural goods is the saga of "The Bone People." The book was published in New Zealand in February, 1984, by Spiral Collective, a nonprofit feminist press run by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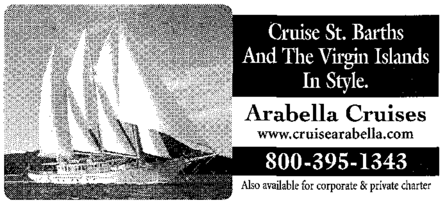
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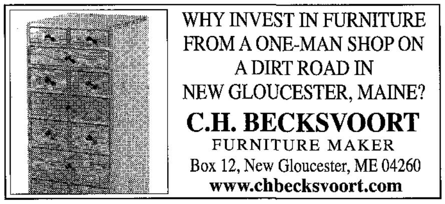
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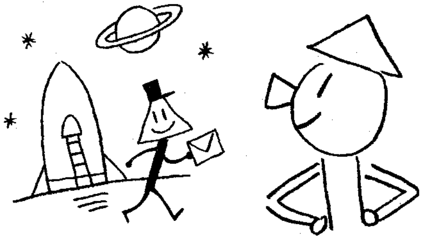
three women in Wellington. Its author, Keri Hulme, had published poems and short stories, but "The Bone People" was her first novel. It had been rejected by every major publishing house to which it was submitted; English describes it as "a long and somewhat perverse mixture of genres, styles, and languages, sloppily edited and riddled with typographic errors—by no means an obvious winner in the marketplace." Still, two print runs of two thousand copies both sold out. Then, in the summer of 1984, "The Bone People" won two awards. The first was the New Zealand Book Award for Fiction, a leading book prize in New Zealand but of little note internationally. The jury, English says, was impressed by the novel's "fusion of Anglo ('Pakeha') and indigenous (Maori) elements within a dreamlike narrative of trauma and recovery as a kind of national allegory." Though Hulme herself is only one-eighth Maori, and was reared and educated in Anglophone society, "The Bone People" was consequently branded as "Maori fiction." And it was under this description that it won its second prize of 1984, the Pegasus Prize for Maori Literature.

The Pegasus is an instrument of ExxonMobil. It was founded, in 1977, in order to promote international awareness of marginalized literary cultures, and it circulates among countries in which ExxonMobil has subsidiaries—a neat example, as English says, of "glocalization," the official respect for (or colonization of) local cultural ecologies that is one of the contemporary features of international business. In 1984, New Zealand was the lucky host of the Pegasus, and "The Bone People" was the beneficiary. On cue, the choice was attacked on the ground that Hulme was not a real Maori. This was exactly the scandal needed to get the book onto the international stage, and, in 1985, after it was published in Britain, by Hodder & Stoughton, it won the most prestigious literary prize in England, the Booker. It was thus elevated to the canon of what is now called world literature. It is the "Maori novel," and, English says, it is taught as such in contemporary world literature and postcolonial survey classes; it is discussed by journalists and scholars of world literature in articles and at conferences (one bibliography lists more than a hundred articles); most tellingly, perhaps, it remains in print in the United States and the United Kingdom some twenty years after its original publication, while other novels from the same period, including virtually all of the others that won the New Zealand Book Award, have long since disappeared from the international marketplace. It is not as a New Zealand novel that "The Bone People" has become a classic, but, as declared on or inside the cover of every paperback edition since the late 1980s, as a world-certified, globally consecrated Maori novel.

English's point is not that "The Bone People" is inauthentic. In his scheme, after all, accusations of inauthenticity are crucial to the successful functioning of the cultural economy: they shore up our faith that there is such a thing as authenticity. When people complained that "The Bone People" was not a genuine Maori novel, they were saying, in effect, that there is, or could be, a genuine Maori novel, and that they, and not functionaries in some multinational corporation's public-relations apparat, were the ones in the proper position to recognize it as such. What the story of "The Bone People" reveals is that, whether or not a work of "indigenous" literature is the product of pure indigenes, if it is to achieve international recognition as world literature it must carry certain markers. For one thing, it cannot be identified as national literature. A book by a New Zealand writer would be unlikely to make it into the world-literature canon. The Pegasus Prize was for a work of *Maori* literature. Once, nationality was something that an ambitious writer hoped to transcend. A novelist aspired to recognition not as a New Zealand writer or a Nigerian writer but as, simply, a writer. Now nationality is transcended downward. Recognition comes from having one's work identified with a marginalized or "endangered" community within the larger national or global polity—with Ibo culture (rather than Nigerian), or Maori (rather than New Zealand).

Although there are some minor differences, English's discussion of this development parallels Pascale Casanova's in her rather brilliant book "The



World Republic of Letters" (translated from the French by M.B. DeBevoise; Harvard; $35). Casanova is also writing about the system in which books circulate in the competition for recognition. The standard practice is to understand works of literature as products of a national tradition, as examples of French literature or American literature; Casanova's argument is that, on the contrary, the system has always been global. As she puts it, literatures are "not a pure emanation of national identity; they are constructed through literary rivalries, which are always denied, and struggles, which are always international."

Casanova thinks that every ambitious writer aspires to be recognized for meeting the standards of the metropole. In her book, the metropole is Paris, the eternal center of the literary universe (she is, after all, French); but it might be London or New York as well. "Paris" is the place where art and literature are always truly modern and up to date, and the rest of the world measures its lateness by that meridian. For centuries, meeting the standard of Paris meant escaping the provincialism of one's own culture—the constraints imposed by the Church, or the state, or the Party, which all want literature to serve their interests—and making art for the sake of art. James Joyce and Samuel Beckett, Gertrude Stein and Richard Wright, Milan Kundera and Danilo Kiš all went to Paris in order to escape the fate of being national writers. They assimilated, not to Frenchness (as Casanova points out, Joyce and Beckett, although they lived in Paris for much of their lives, had no interest in French literary life) but to the universal modern idea of the artist. Now, she thinks, the strategy for acceptance has shifted from assimilation to differentiation, and differentiation means *not* being modern.

The challenge now is to combine elements of non-metropolitan indigenousness with elements that metropolitan readers recognize as "literary." A subnational novel, such as "The Bone People," must be what English calls "world-readable." The judges of the Booker Prize probably didn't know the difference between Maoris and Mallomars, but they knew, instinctively, how a work of "Maori fiction" should look. It should be a hybrid of postmodernist heteroglossia (multiple and high-low discursive registers, mixed genres, stories within stories) and pre-modernist narrative (conventional morality, the simulation of an oral story-telling tradition). Between them, English and Casanova list the features of the world-literature prototype: a trauma-and-recovery story, with magic-realist elements, involving abuse and family dysfunction, that arrives at resolution by the invocation of spiritual or holistic verities. If you add in a high level of technical and intellectual sophistication, this is a pretty accurate generic description of a novel by Toni Morrison.

"The Economy of Prestige" and "The World Republic of Letters" are not debunking exercises. They are simply efforts to understand literature sociologically. "Caxtons are mechanical birds with many wings," says the Martian, about books, in Craig Raine's famous poem, "and some are treasured for their markings." The Martian doesn't know why the markings between the covers labelled "Beloved" are more treasured, or represent more cultural capital, than the markings inside the covers labelled "Paco's Story." The Martian sees only that human beings attach high value to some of these otherwise identical and interchangeable objects and low value to others, and he/she attempts, by analyzing the system in which the objects are produced, circulated, and consumed, to figure out how this happens. From the Martian point of view, it certainly *looks* like a competition, because the value of "Beloved" is determined by all the things that make it different from "Paco's Story." It's a relational system: the value of a cultural good is relative to the value of every other cultural good. That most of us on planet Earth deny that competition has anything to do with the esteem that we, as individuals, confer on a particular book or painting or song or movie does not mean that the Martian is wrong. Our denial is just one more thing that needs to be explained. The Martian is experiencing literature from the other side of the looking glass.

Of course, as English and Casanova would agree, books are read on this side of the looking glass. We are ourselves products of the culture whose products we consume, and we can't help taking it, for the most part, on its own terms.

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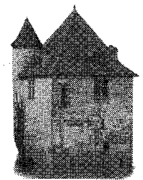

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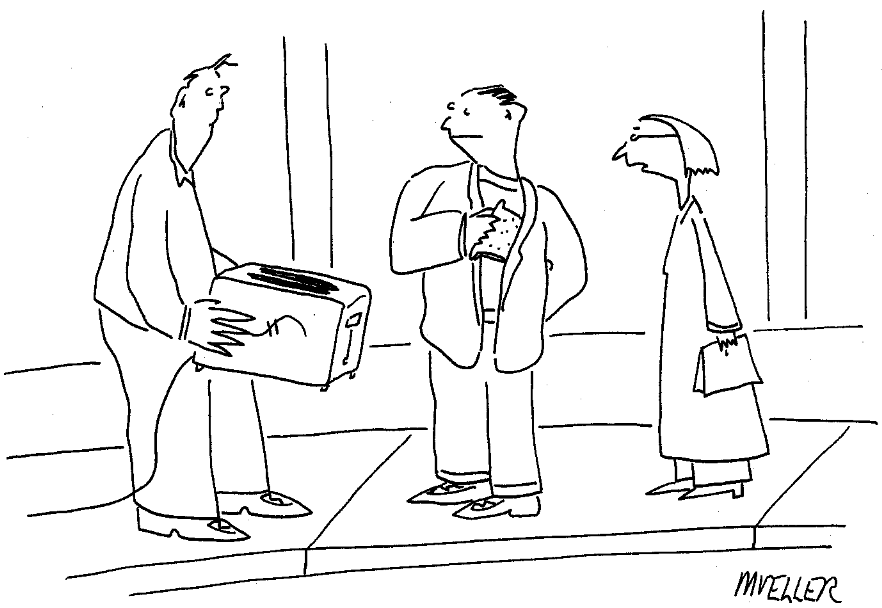

*"Don't encourage him."*

* * *

Still, their very strong books belong to a general challenge to the usual practices of literary pedagogy. Literature departments are almost always organized by language and country, but Casanova's book gives us many reasons to doubt whether this captures the way literature really works. She has an excellent account, for example, of the international influence of Faulkner—once his novels had been translated into French. He was, as she describes him, the first of the glocal writers, an acknowledged model for the Colombian Gabriel García Márquez, the Peruvian Mario Vargas Llosa, the Algerian Rachid Boudjedra, and the Spaniard Juan Benet, not to mention the African-American Toni Morrison. Faulkner was the novelist of the American South who demonstrated to novelists of the global South how to represent a marginal community in an advanced literary style, a style that could gain the respect of "Paris." English's and Casanova's books also challenge the conventional "shock of recognition" idea of influence, which imagines literary history as one soul speaking to another across time and space. The soul may speak, but the international context is the reason it is heard. The appeal that Faulkner had for García Márquez had everything to do with the place that Faulkner occupied in the global literary system, and with the place that García Márquez occupied as well.

Literature is conventionally taught as a person-to-person aesthetic experience: the writer (or the poem) addressing the reader. Teachers cut out English's middlemen, the people who got the poem from the writer to us, apparently confirming his point that we have to deny the economics of cultural value in order to preserve the aesthetics. But, once we're outside the classroom, how rigidly are these conventions adhered to? How many people today really imagine "art" as a privileged category, exempt from the machinations of the marketplace? The literary marketplace has always been a theme of literature: "Tristram Shandy" reflects on its own status as a cultural good; Aristophanes' "The Clouds" is a satire on literary competition. Since the nineteen-sixties, the constructed nature of the art experience has been one of advanced art's principal preoccupations. Andy Warhol's Campbell's-soup-can paintings are all about art as commodity. The frenzy of prize-creation in the nineteen-seventies and eighties that English describes may have been a panicky middlebrow reaction against the demystification of culture that was already well under way, or it may have been a symptom and agent of that demystification. It is difficult to see it as a reinforcement of the ideal of autonomous art. That ideal disappeared a long time ago. The Martians have already landed. ♦

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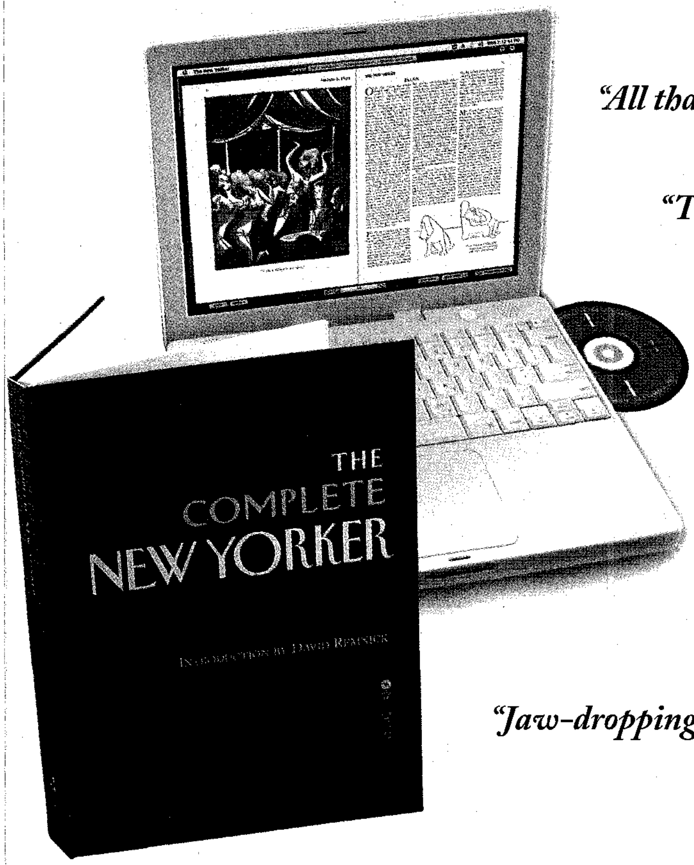

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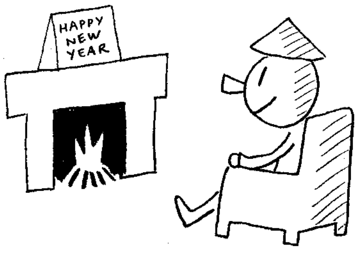
# BRIEFLY NOTED

The Sing-Song Girls of Shanghai, *by Han Bangqing, translated from the Mandarin and the Wu by Eileen Chang and revised and edited by Eva Hung (Columbia; $29.50).* This huge novel about life in the brothels of fin-de-siècle Shanghai, published in 1894, is considered one of the great works of Chinese literature, although few Chinese, it seems, have actually read it. (It may be China's "Ulysses.") This is partly because much of the book was written in the regional Wu dialect rather than in the dominant Mandarin; one suspects that the English version, coming after a Mandarin translation, arrives as a shadow of a shadow of the original. Still, the whiff of decadence is strong. Despite occasional bouts of drama—an attempted murder-suicide, adulterers caught in flagrante—the story is essentially static: a never-ending round of parties, where men grown rich from foreign trade play drinking games all night and courtesans stoke their opium pipes.

Hidden Camera, *by Zoran Zivkovic, translated from the Serbian by Alice Copple-Tosic (Dalkey Archive; $13.95).* "This was only a hidden camera episode, after all; everything was under control, nothing bad could happen," Zivkovic's nameless narrator says, trying to soothe himself amid the spiralling surrealities of this mystery novel. After receiving an invitation to a movie screening, he finds himself next to an enigmatic woman, watching a film of the two of them sitting on a park bench. This is the first in an increasingly outlandish chain of events, as the narrator follows a trail of invitations across a darkened cityscape. His growing paranoia leads him to suppose that he is the victim of a hidden-camera prank for television, and he starts to behave as if his every action were being filmed. Zivkovic's unexpected dénouement, however, gestures toward a far stranger, possibly mystical, cause.



The Poems of Catullus, *translated from the Latin, with commentary, by Peter Green (California; $24.95).* Green compares Catullus to Byron—both were well-connected, wrote poetry full of allusions to contemporary affairs, and were no strangers to scandal—and accepts the traditional identification of the faithless lover in the poem "Lesbia" as Clodia Metelli, an aristocrat of great infamy who was also the object of a character assassination by Cicero. Green captures the wised-up, bitchy world of the poems with suitably modern slang—"jerk," "hotshots," "slut"—but at the same time attempts to scrupulously reproduce Catullus' complex original meters: "perky" hendecasyllables, "oddly graceless" choliambics, and so on. These are notoriously difficult to render in English; Green says that he took on the galliambics of Poem 63 as the result of a bet.

Proust's English, *by Daniel Karlin (Oxford; $45).* This elegantly argued study explores the role of English words in "À la Recherche du Temps Perdu," and of the Anglophilia they represent. Proust did not speak English, and read it only with difficulty (though he translated Ruskin, with much help from others). But his novel is sprinkled with words such as "gentleman," "le five-o'clock tea," and, most significant, "snob." Odette, the ultimate social climber, even speaks "with a slight English accent," revealing her falseness, her snootiness, and her sordid past; her mother, Proust writes, sold her, "when she was still hardly more than a child, at Nice, to a wealthy Englishman." The English language—like the yachting and golf enjoyed by the object of Marcel's desire—often connotes faithlessness, vulgarity, and even sexual ambiguity. But, perhaps most of all, it embodies modernity and the inescapability of change, the very force that transforms Odette into one of the most fashionable women in Parisian society.

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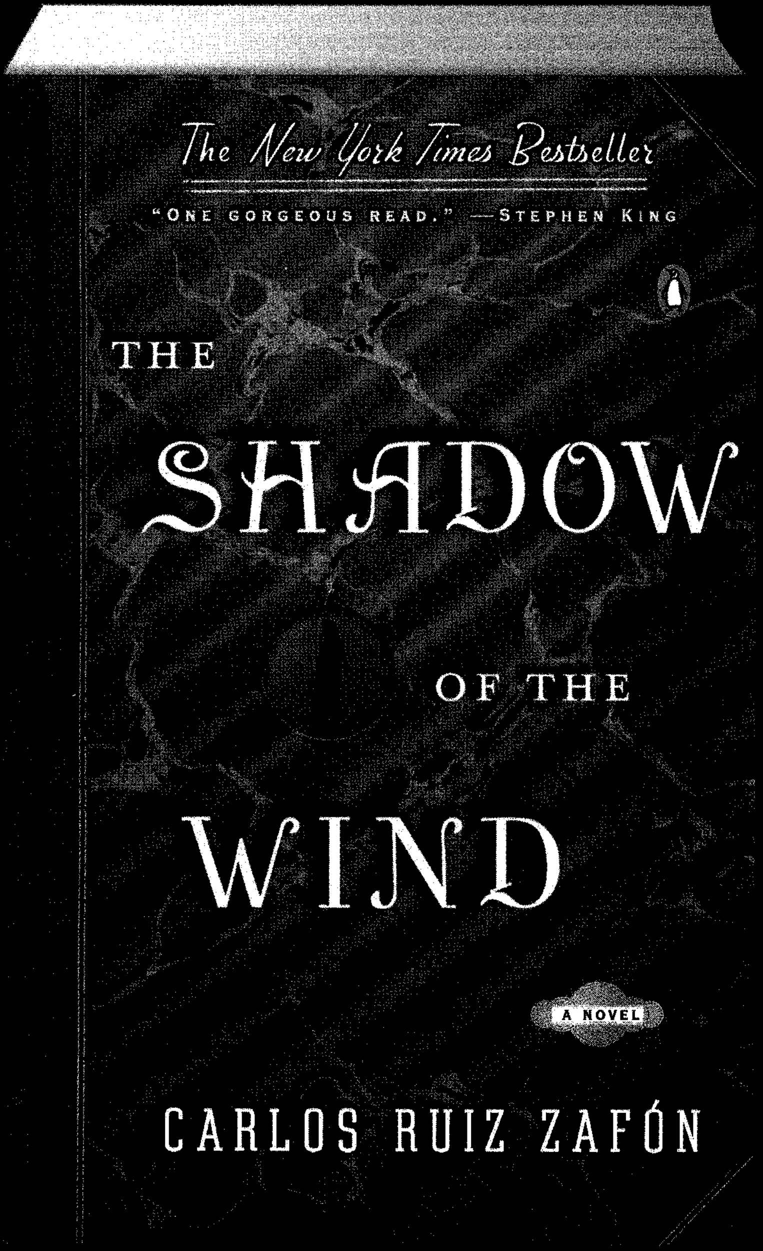
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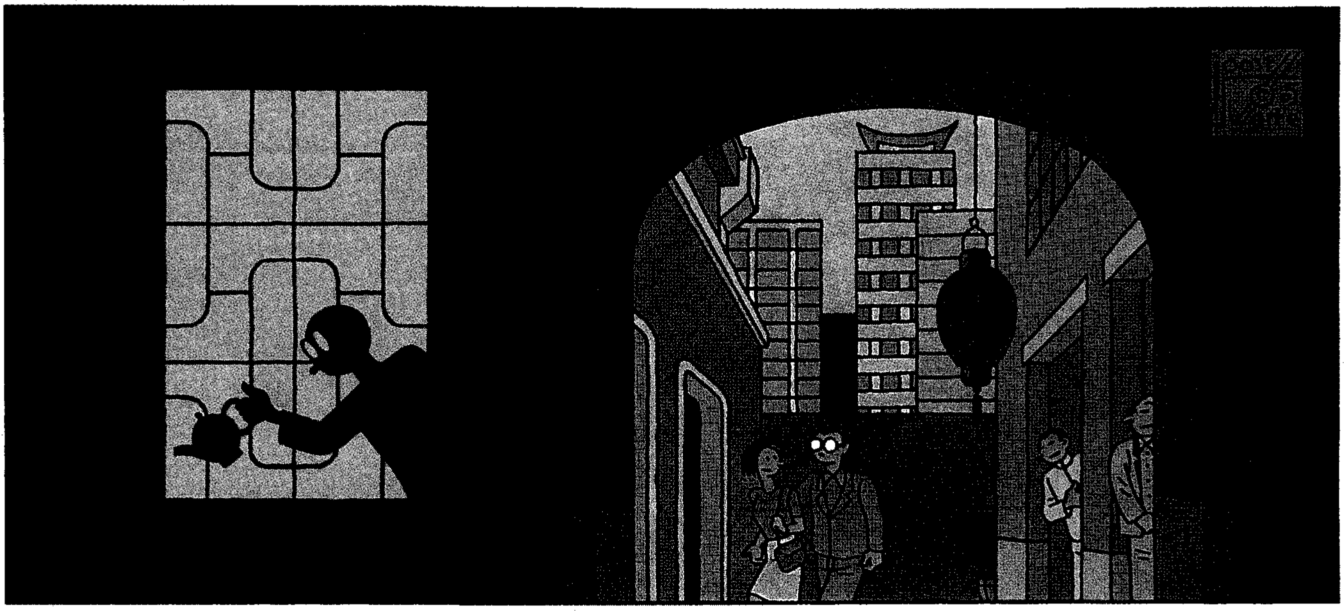
## THE SKY LINE

# SHANGHAI SURPRISE

*The radical quaintness of the Xintiandi district.*

### BY PAUL GOLDBERGER

Modern Shanghai combines the soul of Houston with the body of Las Vegas. In Pudong, the city's booming financial district, flashing trails of colored lights race up and down the shafts of office towers, as if they were casinos. One freshly minted skyscraper, Aurora Plaza, has a façade of gold reflective glass that at night becomes even more garish, turning into a multistory L.E.D. screen on which huge smiling faces cinematically dissolve into bright corporate logos. The sky line of China's largest city has become a strangely exuberant version of the "Blade Runner" aesthetic, with simple geometries and sharp lines cutting into the sky; it may not be beautiful but, in its staggering scale and intensity, it certainly is awe-inspiring.



*Xintiandi is a stage set of an idyllic Chinese past, a finely wrought balance of theme park and shopping mall.*

JOOST SWARTE

The most provocative new architectural project in Shanghai, however, has none of the youthful brashness of the Pudong towers. Called Xintiandi, which means "New Heaven and Earth," and completed in 2002, it is a refined cluster of traditionally styled Shanghai brick town houses near the old French Concession district. Arranged along a two-block pedestrian street, the complex is filled with restaurants, cafés, night clubs, and luxury boutiques, including Comme des Garçons and Christian Dior. The seven-acre development, which is highly popular, is what Western builders call a "festival marketplace." Like Baltimore's Inner Harbor, New York's South Street Seaport, and Boston's Quincy Market, Xintiandi is a stage set of an idyllic past, created so that people in China can experience the same finely wrought balance of theme park and shopping mall that increasingly passes for upscale urban life in the United States. Just as many of Shanghai's skyscrapers reiterate gestures that long ago became clichés in the West—enormous atriums; tall, pointy spires—the idea of a Disneyfied old downtown is a recycled one. Yet in China, a country with almost no tradition of preserving everyday commercial architecture or of putting up new buildings that look like old ones, the notion feels radical. Before Xintiandi, crowning a glass office tower with a pagoda was seen as a sophisticated homage to the architectural past.

The principal architect of Xintiandi is, not surprisingly, an American: Benjamin Wood, who once worked for Benjamin Thompson, the designer of Quincy Market. (Wood recently relocated from Boston to Shanghai.) Wood's design is a clever mixture of renovated old buildings and new construction imitating the style of *shikumen*, the gray brick town houses that were built in many Shanghai neighborhoods beginning in the eighteen-sixties. Three-story structures built along narrow alleys, with elaborate, stone-carved entries leading into small interior courtyards, *shikumen*—the term means "stone gate"—generally housed upper-middle-class families. (Under Communist rule, *shikumen* were converted to tenements, and as many as seven families were shoehorned into them.) Like many buildings in cosmopolitan Shanghai, a *shikumen* combines Asian and Western influences; it is a Chinese home with a Parisian sensibility, a hybrid form both delicate and monumental.

Authentic *shikumen* never looked quite as polished as the ones in Xintiandi. Wood's design seamlessly blends new architectural elements with original stone gates and carved lintels. To create a more open composition, Wood removed many of the crumbling houses on the site; of the houses that were kept, many had an outer wall or two replaced, and almost all the interiors were gut-renovated. The result is a cleaner and more orderly neighborhood, studded with public spaces that resemble Western piazzas. The architect also inserted large picture windows and glass storefronts into many of the original doorways, and created artful replicas of the narrow alleyways that provided the main circulation within *shikumen* complexes. It's fun to wander through these synthetic labyrinths, shopping bags in hand.

The building of Xintiandi required some awkward trade-offs. A large mansion in the neighborhood housed thirty families before the site's developer, Shui On, took over the area; now the building has no tenants. The occupants were moved elsewhere—an easier matter in China than in New York. (In the end, more than two thousand families were relocated.) The developers then gave the mansion an exquisite restoration, turning it into what they call the clubhouse, which includes a conference center and a set of exclusive private dining rooms. Xintiandi's success has also increased the value of land in the immediate area, making it more likely that the aging *shikumen* surrounding Wood's ersatz neighborhood will be demolished. In time, the inauthentic may drive out the authentic altogether.

Shanghai has only a few parks and public squares, and they tend to be clumsily conceived. In the center of the city, the crowded new Renmin Square, built on the site of a former racetrack, is dominated by the huge Shanghai Art Museum and the Grand Theatre, two banal modern buildings, and the green space is almost inconsequential. Streets in Chinese cities have traditionally been used for transport and commerce, not for social encounters. The emblematic user of the Chinese street is the woman who bargains at an open-air street market. Nothing seems less Chinese than the notion of the flâneur, of the street as a place in which to observe other people.

Xintiandi has given the residents of Shanghai a place to experience the public realm as something pleasant. Moreover, it has encouraged them to acknowledge the affection they have for the historic parts of the city, even as bulldozers ruthlessly knock down one decaying neighborhood after another. In one section of Xintiandi, the developers built a full-size, painstakingly detailed *shikumen* for public display; it is furnished with antiques and artifacts that might have been owned by a typical Chinese family, and has rooms for a dowager grandmother, a married couple, children, and a boarder. The exhibit romantically proposes that the boarder—whose room is a small, dark chamber off a landing—is a struggling young writer.

The inspiration for the Xintiandi project was a gray brick building, no larger than a house, sitting in the middle of the site; it is where the Chinese Communist Party originally met, in 1921. (Mao himself attended the first meeting.) Vincent Lo, the developer who runs Shui On, was told by government officials that the buildings adjacent to the old meeting place had to be maintained, and that none of the garish commercialism that marks most Chinese retail establishments would be permitted beside it. Lo sought the advice of Wood, who argued that there was a way to mix historic preservation and commercial real-estate development. If Mao's old meeting hall had to remain untouched, Wood said, why not make older Chinese architecture the theme of the whole development?

The banks and the government were initially wary of the project. "We wanted to create a mixed-use neighborhood, and we wanted to keep the streets walkable—it is not easy to do in China," Albert Chan, a manager at Shui On, told me. "When we started this project, we showed it to people, and they said, 'No Chinese will eat outside.' But if you give them the right kind of place they will."

As in Xintiandi's American counterparts, the crowds are a mixture of foreigners—it is one of the city's most popular tourist destinations—and locals. When the project opened, it was mostly expatriates visiting, Chan said. "Now more than half the people who visit are locals." In this case, the locals tend to be members of China's élite professional class; dinner for two at one of Xintiandi's restaurants can easily cost sixty dollars or more, and a typical laborer's daily wage is less than five dollars.

Xintiandi is so successful that Shui On has been asked to replicate its formula elsewhere in China, and other developers are trying to build copycat projects. Christopher Choa, an American architect who lives in Shanghai, told me, "It has become a verb. Developers say to architects, 'Can you Xintiandi this project for me?' The young Chinese people come because they think it's trendy, the foreigners come because they think it's historically significant, and the old people come because they feel nostalgia." Since Xintiandi opened, Shanghai has begun to preserve much more architecture than it ever did before. During the first forty years of Communist rule, the city's main promenade, the Bund—a remarkable series of ornate stone office and bank buildings, many of them masterworks of Art Deco from the nineteen-twenties—fell into serious disrepair. But the area is now being restored, and it has become an extremely desirable address: one building, Three on the Bund, was renovated by Michael Graves and contains an Armani boutique, an Evian spa, and a Jean-Georges Vongerichten restaurant.

The Bund is Shanghai's most Western cityscape and its most celebrated vista. It faces the Huangpu River, with the new sky line of Pudong, which didn't exist fifteen years ago, on the other side, just as the old sky line of downtown Manhattan faces the new sky line of Jersey City across the Hudson. But this juxtaposition has even greater drama. The architecture of the Bund has always been thought of as a symbol of Western influence on Shanghai, which may be one of the reasons that these grand buildings were disdained for so many years. But now that they have been rediscovered they demonstrate how potent another Western idea has become here: old architecture is a very good way to make new money. ♦

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## DEPARTMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION

*From the student newspaper of Middlebury College.*

Public Safety confirmed earlier this week that the anonymous student who allegedly called in a bomb threat at Gifford Hall on the morning of Sunday, Sept. 25, was referring to a "bong," not a bomb, outside a particular student's room.

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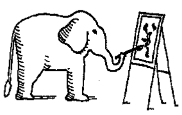

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MUSICAL EVENTS

# OPERA HOT

*The Met's fall season.*

BY ALEX ROSS

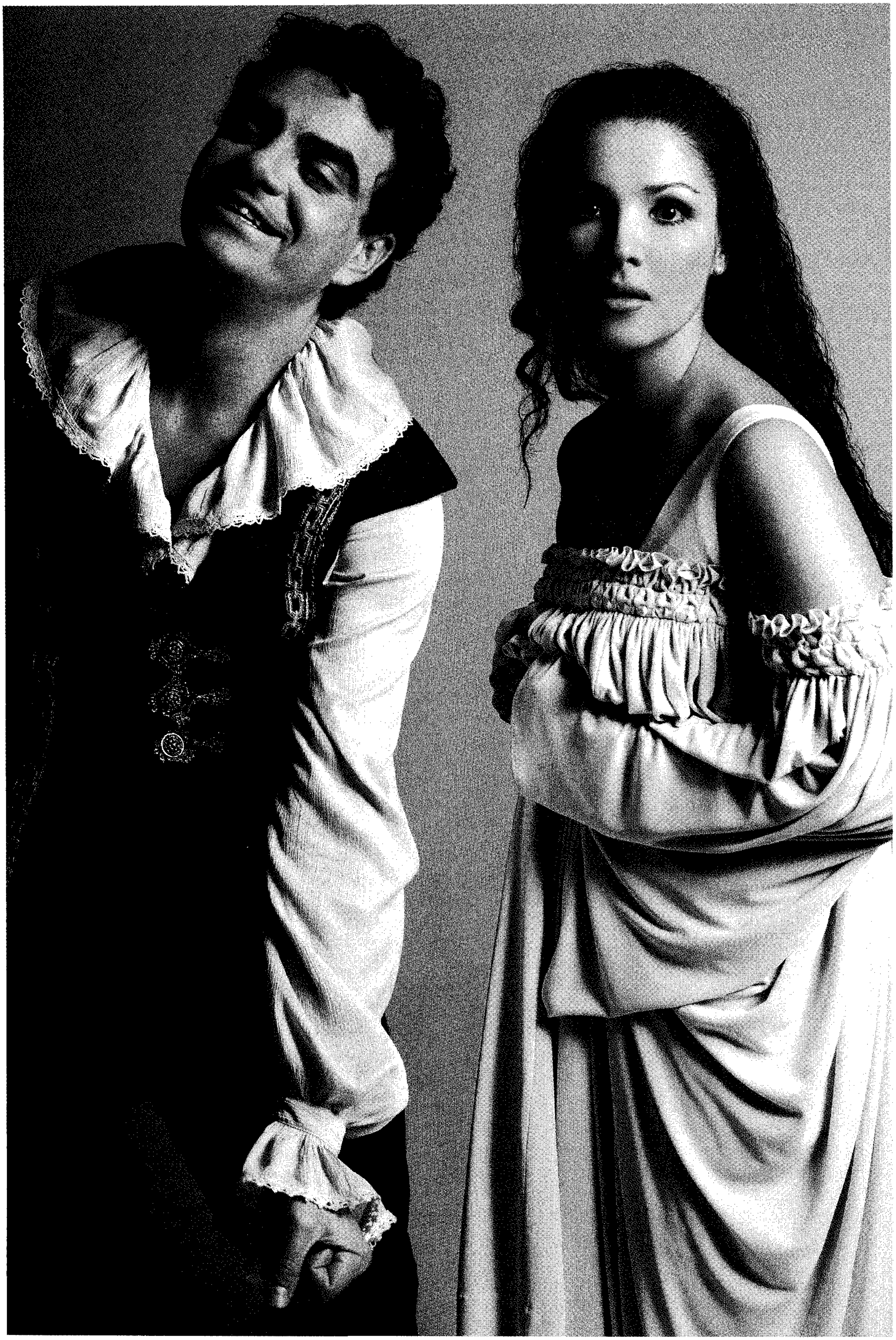
Joseph Volpe, whose sixteen-year tenure as the general manager of the Metropolitan Opera ends this season, may be remembered as a man who stayed true to his title: he managed. Performances went off with maximum efficiency, seven each week. World-class singers showed up in mostly suitable roles, and if they misbehaved they were shown the door, or at least treated brusquely. James Levine was kept happy. Electronic subtitles appeared on the backs of the seats. Modest efforts were made in the direction of fresh production styles, novel repertory, and premières—Tobias Picker's "An American Tragedy" bowed this month—but not enough to ruffle anyone's feather boa. Through various crises—a singer dying onstage, a bloated superstar cancelling, attendance figures falling in the wake of September 11th, a Cuban billionaire patron turning out to be neither a billionaire nor a Cuban—Volpe kept the great old house trundling along. Was he a visionary? No. Did rival American companies—particularly the San Francisco Opera, with its history-making productions of Messiaen's "Saint Francis" and John Adams's "Doctor Atomic"—challenge the Met's preëminence? Yes. But the chaos that has surrounded many big houses elsewhere has been absent from the Met, and in this business the absence of chaos is a considerable achievement.

The fall season showed off the familiar virtues and flaws of the Volpe era. Casting remains the company's glory; a "Così Fan Tutte" with Matthew Polenzani, Mariusz Kwiecien, Barbara Frittoli, Magdalena Kožená, and Thomas Allen was a model Mozart performance, and James Levine made it shine. A revival of "Ariadne auf Naxos" gave witness to Violeta Urmana's majestic ascent from mezzo-soprano to dramatic soprano roles. The young Italian tenor Giuseppe Filianoti made a dashing début as Edgardo in "Lucia di Lammermoor," and acquired a fan club in the upper balconies by the fifth performance. An old-school, from-the-heart singer in the mode of Giuseppe di Stefano, Filianoti plucked off high notes with a clear, pinging tone, maintained a generous long line, and threw himself into the role with infectious, almost loony enthusiasm. On the ho-hum side, a new staging of Gounod's "Roméo et Juliette," set in a sort of Renaissance astronomer's fantasy world, was beautiful to look at but dramatically inert. If the creative team had any strong ideas, they seem to have been squelched sometime during the rehearsal process.

Peter Gelb, the former head of the Sony Classical label, takes over from Volpe next fall. Expect more chic, more flair, more vaguely radical gestures at the Met. The one-man army of Peter Sellars will finally invade the house. The film director Anthony Minghella is scheduled to bring his production of "Madama Butterfly" from London. Singers will probably be younger, slimmer, more photogenic; Gelb reportedly plans to lean on Anna Netrebko and Rolando Villazón, two singers with a certain movie-star quality. (Internet wits call them "opera hot," which means that they are explosively sexy in comparison with the usual.) Such moves may produce short-term gains in attendance, though the long-term health of the company cannot be guaranteed by glitz alone. Ideally, Gelb will think past the marketing level and grapple with what it means to put on opera in the twenty-first century.

Netrebko and Villazón recently sang together in a revival of "Rigoletto," providing a preview of the Gelb regime. (They will be back in January and February.) Of the two, Netrebko is the one obviously put on earth to sing at the

*Anna Netrebko and Rolando Villazón in "Rigoletto." Photograph by Max Vadukul.*



Met. Her voice is preternaturally lovely, glowingly audible even at the softest dynamic levels, rich-toned from top to bottom. She spins lusciously long phrases, although she tends to lose control of pitch in rapid runs. She is obviously determined to be something other than a lyric ornament, as her slow, haunting "Caro nome" and willowy poses made clear. Villazón is equally riveting, in a different way. He doesn't have the biggest voice in the tenor business (Filianoti's rings out better), but he works overtime to make his presence felt, partly through pinpoint musicianship and partly through vehement expression. His Duke came off as a demented young narcissist, yet was dangerously appealing all the same. What's worrying is that he sometimes pushed his voice to a shout when orchestra and chorus kicked in behind him. Both Villazón and Netrebko face rocky futures if they stretch their voices too far, but the Met won't be a dull place with them around.

Between 1950 and 1990, the Met presented a grand total of three world premières. Volpe and Levine have made partial amends for that wretched record by bringing forth four new operas in the past fifteen years, with Tan Dun's "The First Emperor" on deck for next season. Unfortunately, premières are still so infrequent that crushing expectations attend them, and disappointment inevitably ensues when a new work fails to astound Diaghilev out of his grave. Picker's "An American Tragedy," which had its first performance on December 2nd and plays through December 28th, has had a predictably mixed reception. Opera fans have acclaimed its solid construction and singable lines; critics, by and large, have scoffed. After two viewings, I find myself siding with the fans. The opera is a fitfully inspired creation, wavering along the fine line between tragedy and turgidity, but, on a primal, Pucciniesque level, it hits the mark.

The story comes from Theodore Dreiser's novel, which also inspired the 1951 film "A Place in the Sun," with Montgomery Clift and Elizabeth Taylor. A poor, handsome, lethally ambitious young man named Clyde Griffiths shacks up with an employee at his uncle's factory, only to cast her aside in favor of a wealthy socialite named Sondra Finchley. When Roberta, his first lover, is found drowned in a lake, Clyde is sent to the electric chair, although he seems guilty more of contemplating murder than of committing it. Gene Scheer, the librettist, sleekly condenses Dreiser's eight hundred and fifty pages, and he could have cut a little more. The first act lacks dramatic situations, and only in the second do we get to the raw meat: Roberta, pregnant and enraged, confronting Clyde in church; the death in the lake; the trial; the walk to the chair. Funny how this Gilded Age melodrama, in which obscene wealth warps the morals of all, anti-abortion laws drive young people to desperation, and capital punishment is handed down without clear physical evidence, is not quite as dated as it should be.

Picker works largely within the lingua franca that has defined mainstream American opera since Gian Carlo Menotti found a popular audience for the form after the Second World War, with "The Medium" and "The Consul." There are vernacular songs and religious hymns to establish the all-American scene, lush verismo textures for the lovemaking, suave Gershwinesque tunes to convey the upper classes at play, distorted genre pieces à la Shostakovich and Britten for public confrontations, and, at moments of maximum fright, bursts of Berg. There's also much that's individual; Picker's harmony flirts with traditional tonality without falling prey to cliché, his orchestration achieves both transparency and power, and his crowd scenes skillfully set solo voices against a booming chorus and a churning orchestra. It's a pleasure to listen to him put one idea in front of another; a twelve-tone composer in his youth, he retains the serialist's habit of working obsessively with a tight array of notes.

Admittedly, Picker's writing here is not as tight as in "Emmeline," the crisply lurid 1996 opera that established his theatrical reputation. The vocal lines flow, but the prosody is odd; long stretches of text are shoehorned into a set melodic pattern, whether or not the pattern fits. ("Bring-it-to-the-*chuuurch*" sounds right; "I'll-meet-you-to-*niiight*" sounds awkward.) Also, there are too many recurring tics, such as the ominous appoggiatura—C sounding over B-flat minor—with which the opera begins. A similar token of doom appears at the beginning of "Emmeline," and it seems to put a heavy gilt frame around the action instead of drawing us in. Yet notice how Picker resolves this chord in the final scene: once Clyde confesses that he could have saved Roberta, fraught B-flat minor gives way to a simpler, starker A minor, on which the opera ends. The score is full of such careful touches; melodrama aside, it's a serious, substantial piece.

The cast was almost excessively fine. Nathan Gunn sang the role of Clyde, and he had the right quotient of male glamour for a performer in competition with the tragically beautiful Monty Clift. His burnished baritone combines the easily separable virtues of smooth legato and crisp diction, and his burnished body wouldn't look out of place in an Abercrombie & Fitch ad. But he lacked loudness, and, by extension, menace; you couldn't think the worst of him. It didn't help that Scheer and Picker gave him a weak aria in which toxic ambition was expressed as a love of motorcars. Susan Graham swanned grandly through the Sondra Finchley role, adding a sardonic edge to her plush mezzo timbre. Patricia Racette gave dramatic fire to Roberta. Richard Bernstein, as the D.A., showed off a dark, commanding bass-baritone. Dolora Zajick thundered righteously in the role of Clyde's mother, her deepest tones putting the fear of God into decadent Manhattan.

James Conlon conducted with self-effacing panache, and, reportedly, helped fix problematic patches of the score during the rehearsals. Francesca Zambello provided psychologically acute direction; her work with Clyde's wealthy relations, who were played by Jennifer Larmore, Kim Begley, William Burden, and Jennifer Aylmer, brought out much funny, telling social detail. Handsome, austere stage pictures were provided by Adrianne Lobel, the set designer; Dunya Ramicova, the costume designer; and James Ingalls, the lighting designer, all of whom work regularly with Peter Sellars. The action took place on multiple levels, and photographic collages evoked the upstate New York setting without lapsing into the picturesque. As he has so often, Ingalls provided the decisive touch: in the drowning scene, a bright light somehow made everything dark. ♦

THE CURRENT CINEMA

# THE OTHER

*"Munich," "Hidden," and "The New World."*

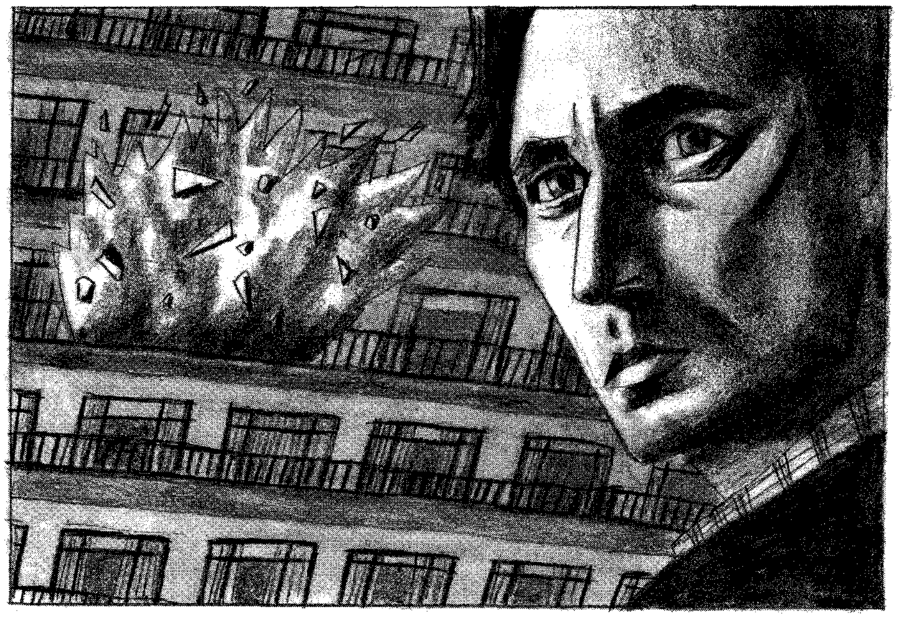
BY ANTHONY LANE

The first minutes of "Munich" unfold at speed. Eight Palestinians scale the fence of the Olympic Village, enter the quarters of the Israeli athletes, and take them hostage. We know the consequence, and the director, Steven Spielberg, tells it with a busy blend of news footage—ABC's Jim McKay saying, "They're all gone," as the athletes' fate becomes clear—and dramatic reconstruction. The events in Germany in 1972 are not Spielberg's main concern; instead, he looks away from the glare and into the shadows, where a team of operatives sidles around Europe in the ensuing months and eliminates those responsible for the massacre. Munich was merely the starting gun.

The plan of retaliation is set up in Israel with the imprimatur of Golda Meir (Lynn Cohen). Once the team is in motion, however, it floats free. The leader is Avner (Eric Bana), a sensitive soul, brought in from Mossad. The rest, hailing from other countries, are Hans (Hanns Zischler), a document forger; Robert (Mathieu Kassovitz), who makes toys and bombs; Carl (Ciaran Hinds), a calmative figure with cardigan and pipe; and Steve (Daniel Craig), heavily camouflaged by his blond hair and blue eyes. Normally, I love any film—"The Dirty Dozen" being the template—in which a number of disparate die-hards club together to whack a common enemy. Spielberg himself embellished the genre in "Saving Private Ryan," and I had high hopes for his band of brothers in "Munich." And what do we get? The Friendly Five. The precedent is set at the men's getting-to-know-you dinner: as the dialogue fades out, we watch them laughing and chomping en bloc, with a surge of guitar and strings, courtesy of John Williams, egging them along.

The scene exhibits the torn loyalties of the enterprise. Spielberg wants to make a heart-racer, all popping pistols and howling tires, but he also wants to take his foot off the gas, put a hand to his heart, and deliver a parable on political retribution. There is some attempt at evenhandedness: at least three of the revengers' victims are carefully cast to seem as kindly, courteous, and literate as possible shortly before they are blown up or shot, and a young P.L.O. fighter, on a dark stairway, gets to lecture Avner on the Palestinians' right to a homeland. But the only home on which the movie dwells is Israel, and, even though a troubled Avner moves his family to Brooklyn, one of the last phrases in the movie, uttered by his case officer (Geoffrey Rush), is "Come home." It echoes nothing so much as the closing exchange between Elliot and E.T. ("Come." "Stay"), and the fact remains that, as anybody who sat numbly through "Amistad" or "The Color Purple" can confirm, Spielberg is not a political artist. He is a humanitarian showman, and most of his audience, despite the fractious accusations of unfairness from both sides, will not go to see "Munich" for the poise of its politics. All the film does is add another tallish tale to the deadlocked mythology of the Middle East, and all the controversies will do is stoke its sense of earnestness, which has to be its least appealing aspect.

There is also the problem of statistics: Avner's squad has eleven Palestinians in its sights, and, in lieu of a plot, we are basically offered a homicidal shopping list. As number six was ticked off, I glanced at my watch: we were already into the third hour of the film, and there were still five villains to go. Needless to say, some of the set pieces are fluent to the point of frictionless. When a young girl runs back into a building where a bomb has been planted for her father, the countdown to calamity is as smooth and sweaty as the cutoff point is predictable. No Spielberg movie will needlessly slaughter a child—and, by implication, neither will the selfless assassins, who seek an honest revenge. There is some bickering, among the Friendly Five, about the justice of their cause (and the question of whether the right men were targeted burns to this day), but it sounds both puffed up and perfunctory. The screenplay, by Tony Kushner and Eric Roth, has a habit of jerking away from the action and landing us in lumpy theatrical harangues. "We're supposed to be righteous. We're Jewish," Robert exclaims. Fair enough, but should he really be banging on about it in broad daylight, in the middle of a



*Eric Bana plays the head of an Israeli retaliatory unit in Steven Spielberg's movie.*

MARK ULRIKSEN

Dutch railway station? What happened to deep cover?

"Munich" is a fidgety, international affair, and the cultural clichés come direct from your travel agent: Eiffel Tower for Paris, bicycles for Holland, and feast-laden tables for Israelis, wherever they are—plus a running gag about getting a receipt for expenses, which, to my taste, seemed moldy with prejudice. Spielberg is plainly nervous about the impulse behind this film, which is why he tosses in wisecracks, further flashbacks to Munich, soft chats between Avner and his mother, and anything else he can, so as to honor and legitimatize a series of state-approved kills. If he had told the story straight, without such hedging, and at half the length, it would have borne far more conviction. At the least, we would have been spared the sight, toward the end, of Avner having sex with his wife while images of the hostage ordeal flood his weary brain. How's that? Is he fathering new life to replace the dead, or getting off on the sound of German helicopters? What a curious arc this movie has described: starting in terror, and ending up on the very brink of kitsch.

If there is an even less festive film this holiday season, it is Michael Haneke's "Hidden," although the director's sleight of hand marks him out as a lugubrious magician of the first rank. His opening shot—an unwavering view of a Paris street, broken only by a passing car—may not seem like a dazzler, but wait. In the house at the end of the street, Georges Laurent (Daniel Auteuil) and his wife, Anne (Juliette Binoche), receive a videotape. They play it, and there, once again, is the shot that we viewed at the start. In other words, it was a recording, made by persons unknown; the result is that almost every scene, for the rest of the movie, becomes booby-trapped. Whatever we observe—Georges walking down a corridor, Anne crying in a café—we cannot be sure whether it is a plain, reliable narrative or whether the camera is a hidden one (hence the title), wielded by a compulsive voyeur.

Georges is the host of a literary discussion program on French TV. Short of wearing a luminous T-shirt with the word "Smug" picked out in rhinestones, there isn't much more that he could do to advertise his character. Fortunately, Auteuil is too subtle and wounded a presence to play Georges as an outright bastard; if anything, he plucks at our sympathy as he turns into a private dick. More tapes arrive at the house, some filmed from inside a car, and Georges, a dab hand at the freeze-frame, picks out a scattering of clues. They lead him to a shabby apartment complex, and to Majid (Maurice Benichou)—a man of his own age, though twice as worn by care. Once, in childhood, they were companions; Majid's parents, North African immigrants, worked at the country house of the Laurent family. The two boys fell out, thanks to Georges's jealousy and scorn, and now, decades later—or so Georges believes—Majid wants his revenge.

Except that Majid doesn't want anything. In Benichou's lovely performance, he is a crumpled and quizzical figure, and he claims to know nothing about the tapes. Georges, however, is confident of being on the right track. To some degree, "Hidden" is a cat-and-mouse thriller, the only problem being that mouse and cat insist on swapping roles. As with all Haneke pictures, from "Funny Games" to "The Piano Teacher," the sense that something truly dire could occur at any time, that the mouse may lie in wait and trap the cat, becomes too much to bear. When the shock does rear up, you may not recover from it, and, in your confusion, you may miss the historical hints. Majid's parents, we hear, went on a march to Paris and never came back. This is a reference to the events of October 17, 1961, when Algerian demonstrators met the force of the law head on. Under the aegis of the prefect of police, Maurice Papon, many of them—estimates vary from thirty to several hundred—were found drowned in the Seine. (Papon was finally tried and convicted, in 1998, not for that but for the crimes that he oversaw in the Second World War, when he signed away more than fifteen hundred French Jews to deportation and death.)

On the other hand, you might protest, why lay all this on Georges? He is no Papon, and were all of us to be harassed for our childhood misdemeanors mankind would stalk itself to death. The answer is that "Hidden," however provocative, is not a political tool; the treatment

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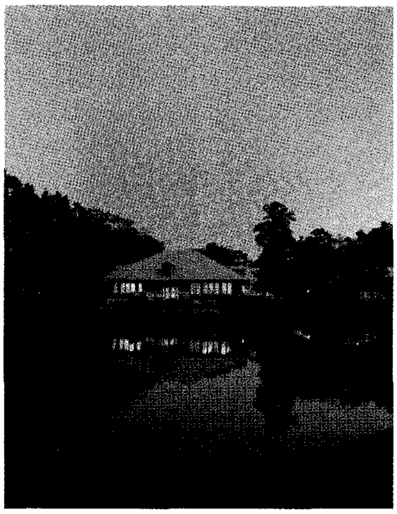

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of minorities in France, as shown by the riots a few weeks ago, may be a national disgrace, but within Haneke's plot it is only one of many motives. Hence the closing image: another steady shot, this time of a school, with multicultural pupils straying in and out. A vision of modern France at peace with itself? Or the latest tape to be made by our neighborhood voyeur? And, given Majid's disclaimer, who the hell *is* watching, and what does he want? You can just imagine the sequel: "Hidden 2: Anne's Fascist Grandma." If Haneke is bent on exposing the roll call of European shame, the franchise could run as long as Narnia.

How would your kids respond if you took them to "The New World"? First, much of Terrence Malick's film would afford them the chance to catch up on the restorative sleep that every child needs. Second, as they watched the British captain make googly eyes at the timid Native American, who learns his language by dancing around and crying "Wind, wind," our young viewers would shout with one voice, "No, dummy, it's the *colors* of the wind."

In short, this is "Pocahontas" minus the songs. It also dispenses with the comedy duo of hummingbird and raccoon, although Malick does have a tendency to cut away, at languid moments, to random squadrons of birds. The central encounter, however, is the same: Captain John Smith (Colin Farrell), recently landed on the shores of what will become Jamestown, spies Pocahontas (Q'orianka Kilcher) in a field of waving grass. She is the daughter of a local king, into whose encampment Smith is led. Among the naturals (as they are known to the British), he finds peace and ecopoise: an equilibrium destroyed by the return of Smith's commander (Christopher Plummer) from England, and the import of European woe.

The burden of this film—the rape of a maiden land—could hardly be simpler, and your reaction will depend on your susceptibility to the Malick manner. All the hallmarks of this formidable tone poet are on show: the murmurs of internal monologue that take the place of conversation, the reverence for green thoughts, the hopeless lurches into action, the bizarre physical sensibility that registers every flicker of sunlight but shies away, as if for fear of bruising, from any breath of sex. Whole passages of non-event stream by, and you half want to scream, and yet—damn it all—by the end of "The New World" the spell of the images, plus the enigma of Kilcher's expression (she is as sculpted as an idol, and every bit as amenable to worship), somehow breaks you down. Pocahontas travels to England with a few kinsmen, and the sight of the Americans, resplendent in skins and feathers, shivering proudly amid topiary and gravelled walks is at once witty and sublime. The lesson is as clear as rainwater: to the innocent eye, ripe for marvelling, every world is new. ♦

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Volume LXXXI, No. 42, December 26, 2005 & January 2, 2006. The New Yorker (ISSN 0028-792X) is published weekly (except for six combined issues: Jan. 24 & 31, Feb. 14 & 21, June 13 & 20, July 11 & 18, Aug. 8 & 15, Dec. 26 & Jan. 2) by The Condé Nast Publications, which is a division of Advance Magazine Publishers Inc. PRINCIPAL OFFICE: The Condé Nast Building, 4 Times Square, New York, NY 10036. Louis Cona, vice-president and publisher; Michael Hess, associate publisher; Hope Hening, executive director of strategic special projects; Gail Day, advertising director; Jamie Engel, advertising director; Alatia Bradley, advertising director; Daniella Wells, executive director marketing & strategic planning; Janine Silvera, executive director of creative services; Douglas Chilcott, associate creative services director/promotion; Jacqueline Cinguina, director of integrated marketing; Judy Safir, director of finance and business operations; Edward Klaris, general counsel. Advance Magazine Publishers Inc.: S. I. Newhouse, Jr., chairman; Charles H. Townsend, president and C.E.O.; John W. Bellando, executive vice-president and C.O.O.; Jill Bright, executive vice-president–human resources; John Buese, executive vice-president–chief information officer; David Orlin, senior vice-president–strategic sourcing; Robert Bennis, senior vice-president–real estate; Maurie Perl, senior vice president-chief communications officer. Shared services provided by Advance Magazine Group: Steven T. Florio, Advance Magazine Group vice chairman; David B. Chemidlin, senior vice-president–general manager, shared services center. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Canada Post Publications Mail Agreement No. 40644503. Canadian Goods and Services Tax Registration No. R123242885. Canada Post return undeliverable Canadian addresses to: P.O. Box 874, Station Main, Markham, ON L3P 8L4.

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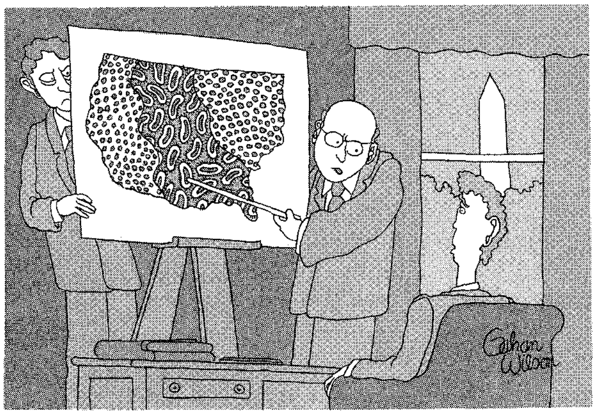
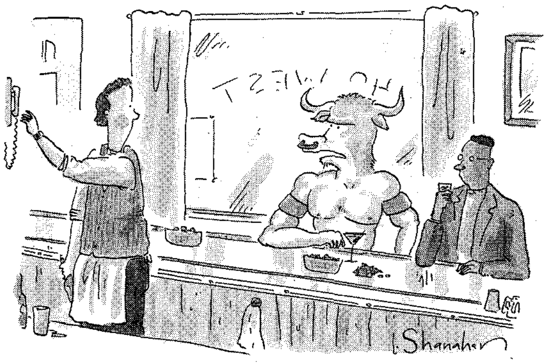
# CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

*Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by P. C. Vey, must be received by Sunday, January 1st. Finalists in the December 12th contest appear below; go online to vote. We will announce the winner, along with the finalists in this week's contest, in the January 16th issue. The winner will be given a signed print of the cartoon. Any U.S. resident age eighteen or over can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit www.newyorker.com/captioncontest.*

## THE WINNING CAPTION



*"And in this section it appears that you have not only alienated voters but actually infected them, too."*
T. C. Doyle, Park City, Utah



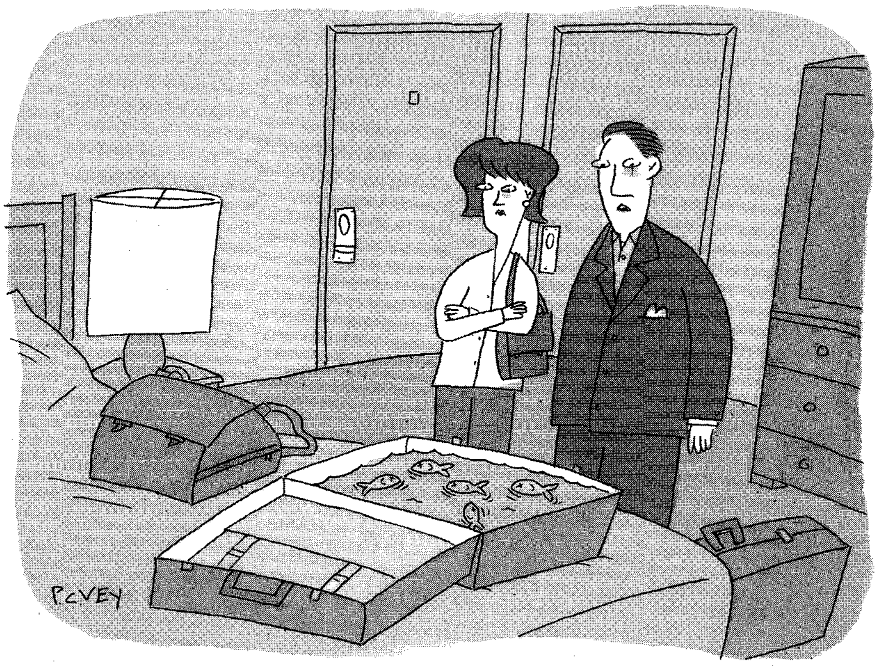
## THE FINALISTS

*"If I'm not back at the maze by eight, my wife reels in the damn string."*
Lou Primus, Horsham, Pa.

*"Don't tell me it's halftime already."*
Mark Swartz, Forest Hills, N.Y.

*"If they ask for Ted's Stud Service, I'll take it."*
Lane Fike, Philadelphia, Pa.

## THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



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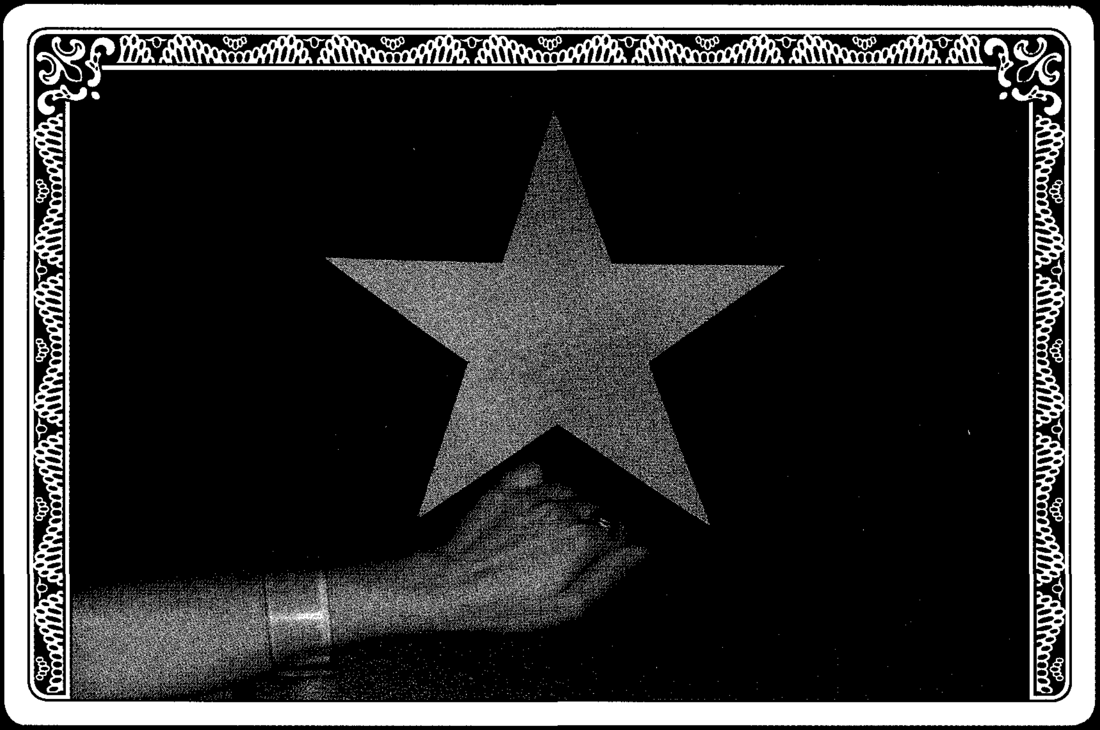

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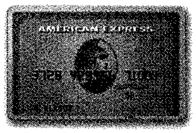

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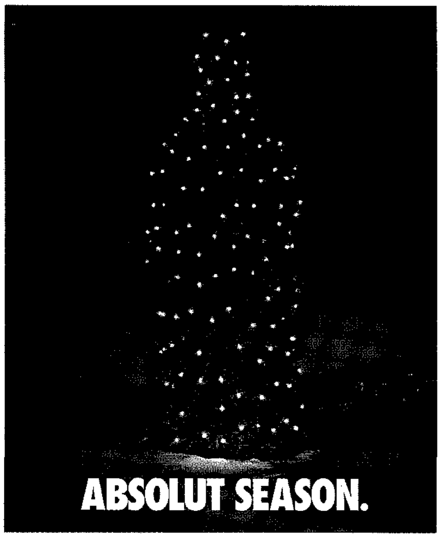
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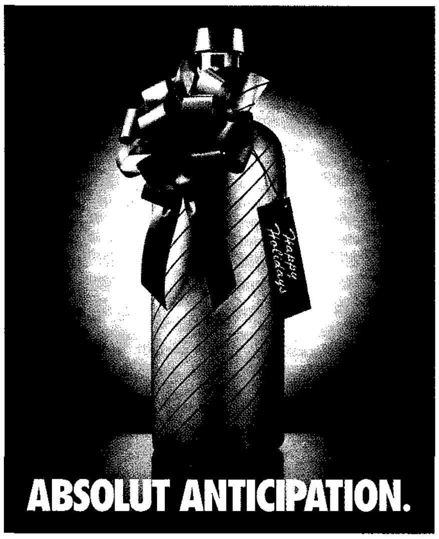
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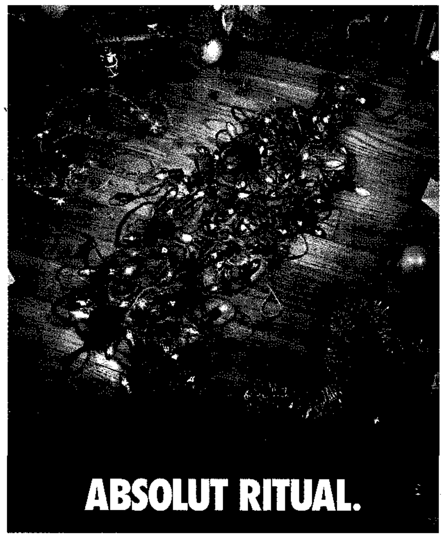
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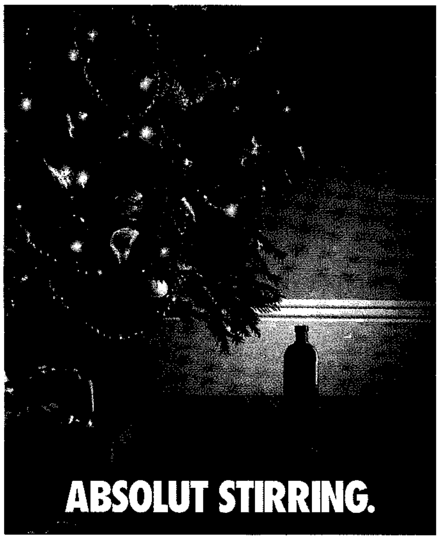
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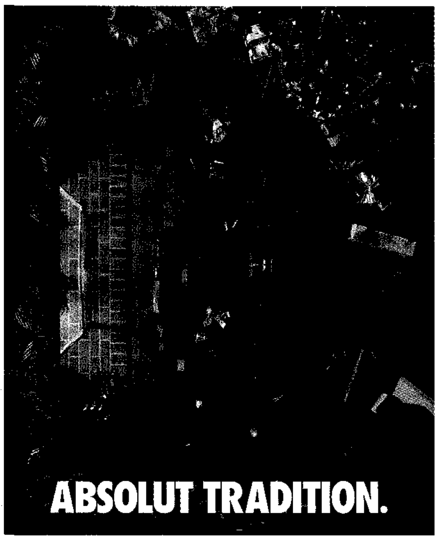
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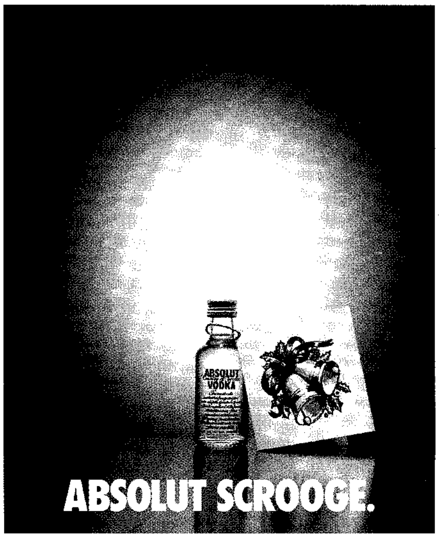
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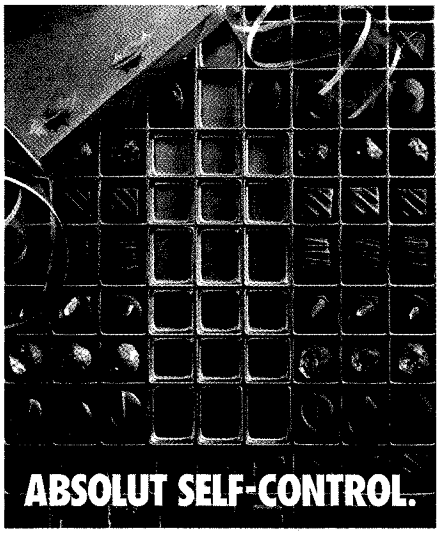
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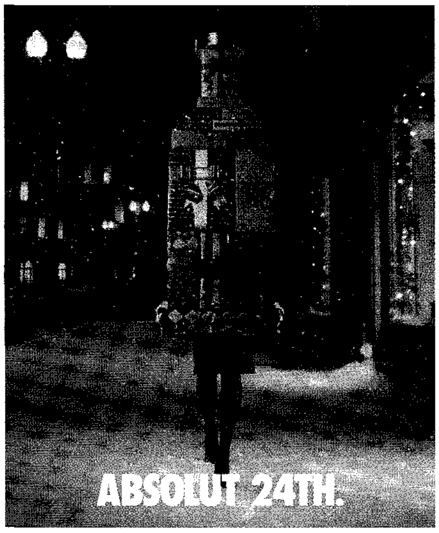
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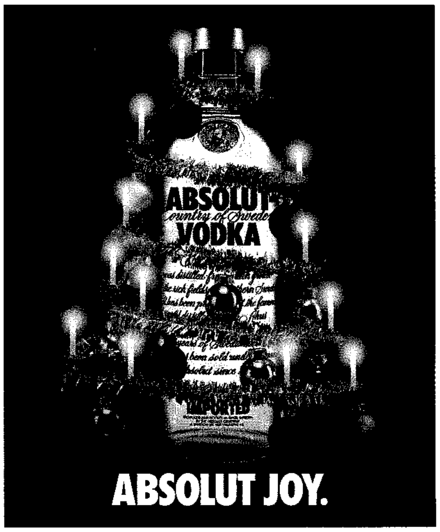
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